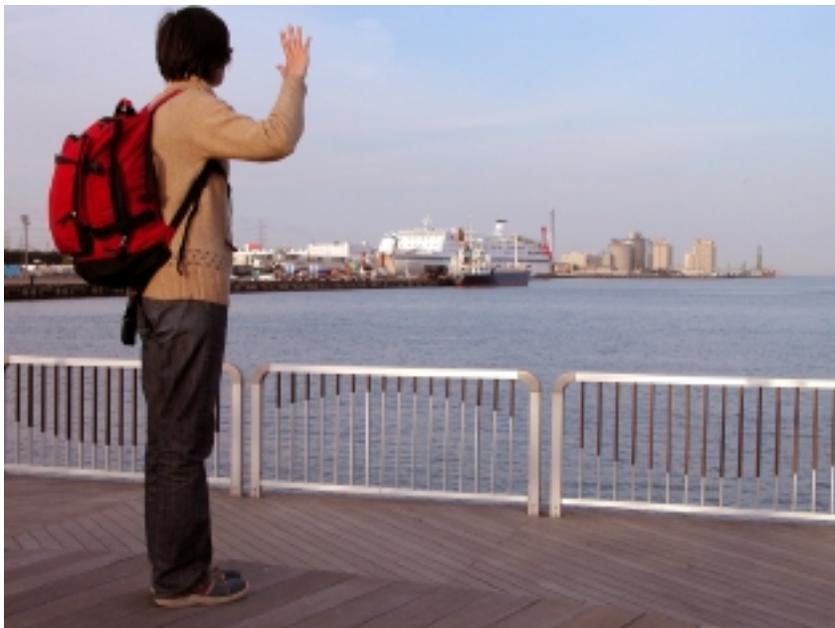




**THE
PREMISES**
A Good Place to Start
ISSUE #4
MARCH 2008



**ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS FACE LIVING WITHOUT
A PERSON, PLACE, THING OR IDEA THAT HAS HAD A
POWERFUL EFFECT (POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, OR BOTH)
ON THEIR LIVES...**

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Hello To Our Readers

This issue's premise was deceptively simple: write a story about character(s) who face a significant loss. Perhaps one-third of all published fiction fits that premise to some degree. For that reason, writing a story that brings something new and makes the story compelling is difficult. Our winning authors were up to the challenge. They have each created a story that rewards readers with a fresh perspective or interesting new twist on familiar themes.

Most challenging for the judges was selecting the winning stories from a large pool of intriguing, well crafted entries presented in a wide variety of styles. To narrow the field, we demanded stories be excellent in all four of our judging criteria.

And speaking of judging, here are some questions on judging we've received at On The Premises.

Did you read my story? Yes! This is a contest-based magazine that is judged blindly. We read every story (except those that do not comply with the rules) because every story could be the winner.

You say you judge blindly, but I just got an e-mail asking a question about my story. How does that work? Division of labor. Each contest has an administrative judge, a reading judge, and prize judges. The administrative judge processes all entries and serves as our liaison to the authors. The reading judge, as the name implies, reads every story. If the reading judge has a question about the author's intent, the administrative judge contacts the author for clarification. At the end of the contest, the reading judge selects 10 finalists to send to the prize judges, while the administrative judge e-mails contestants with entry status (finalist or not). The prize judges read the stories chosen as finalists and rank them. The rankings are then tallied to determine the contest winners.

The judges sent a critique of my story saying it had typographical errors. Typos are easy to fix. Why did that little thing count against me? Craft is one of our judging criteria. And part of being well-crafted is following rules for spelling, usage, and punctuation, unless there is a clear story-related reason to break them.

Between two otherwise equal stories, the better proofread story will always win. And nothing says “I want to win” more than a story that’s been carefully reviewed to remove little errors.

Has your regular cartoonist returned from his alien encounter? Absolutely.

What’s the best way to improve my chances of winning? Keep writing and keep reading.

Bethany Granger,
co-publisher of On The Premises magazine

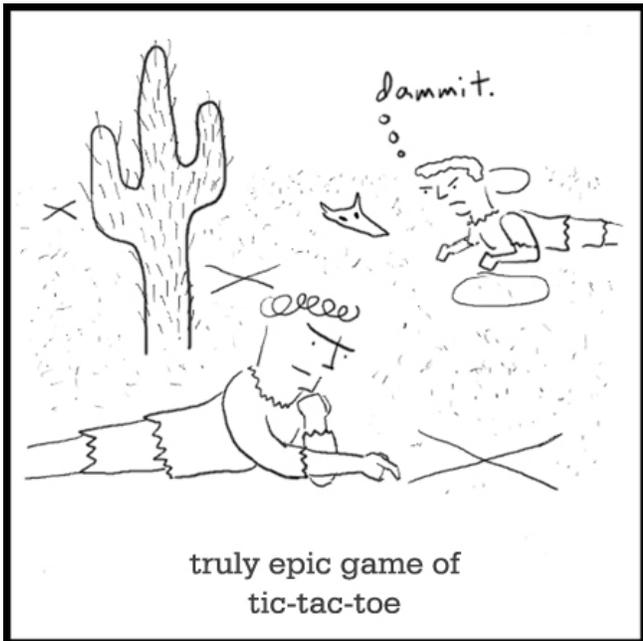
Cartoons!

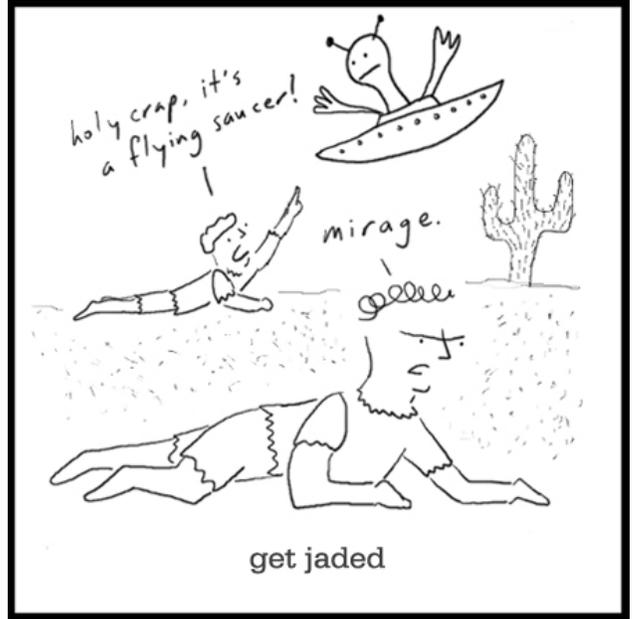
by Francis J. Heaney (art and writing)

This issue, please welcome back our regular cartoonist, Francis Heaney. Francis looked at our premise for this issue and decided that what ought to get lost was me, because I kept hanging over his shoulder while he drew.

For the **cartoons**, he thought the best idea was to have the main characters get lost. Thus, we are proud to present:

things you can do to kill time
when you're lost in the desert





FIRST PRIZE

Chandler Kaiden lives and works in central Illinois. He is the most recent winner of another short fiction contest, the Deja Vu Horror Contest sponsored by Dark Recesses Press. His story, "Breed Love," appears in that magazine's January 2008 issue.

Geist

by Chandler Kaiden

At first, there was only numb horror.

He couldn't move his arms, couldn't catch his breath. Everything was black. The thick stench of mildew, of rust and minerals, coagulated in his nose and throat. Steaming water spilled over his forehead, rained into his eyes, seeped between his lips. Brackish, foul water, full of chemicals.

It seemed to go on forever.

He tried to move. But he was confined, his limbs pressed tightly against his body.

When the water stopped, he heard dull, heavy thumping, like the machinations of an enormous water-logged engine.

The air was thick with steam. The foul water collected around his eyes, spilled into his nostrils, packed his sinuses.

There, in the wet darkness, he tried to drown himself. He inhaled the water. Tried to hold his breath—that breath he'd been instinctively fighting to catch when he

came to—and found that he could hold it and hold it and hold it, and nothing happened.

I want to die.

Of course he did. He had for years. But dying, as far as he knew, was a one time thing. Once done, you just had to endure anything that came after.

*

The bad-smelling blackness went on and on. The crippled hours inched by. Ten, it seemed, for every one that passed.

It felt like days before the water came again, spilling down from above. Cold at first, then near boiling and stinging with chemicals. Hellish.

With all his will power, he wriggled and squirmed and fought.

And he noticed, as the water rushed over him, pooled in the hollows of his ears, as the steam clung to his eyeballs like a layer of hot dead skin, that a faint, ethereal light came from above, with the water. He tensed the muscles in his neck, in his shoulders. He tilted his face upward.

His neck gave just a little, and the blackness spun before him. Tremendous pain shot through him like claws raking his bones. It was the most he'd moved since coming to.

The water stopped. There was heavy, scattershot thumping.

The darkness pressed down.

After a while, he tried again to look up.

The pain was milder, this time. Not so much claws raking his bones as chisels chipping at them. It was still sickening, but not as bad as before.

*

Nine more times the water came. The instances were separated by what seemed like immense spans of time.

Dirty water, and time, and more dirty water, and more time. It wasn't so much that he adjusted to it as he had other things to keep him occupied.

Moving. Or trying to move. That was his primary diversion.

Sometime after the last time the water came—the attendant light floating at the edge of his field of vision like a lonely halo—he lost consciousness.

The dream he had took him back to his life, the way he'd known it.

He'd thought it was the most terrible life anyone could endure. His crushing debt, and his personal failures, and his depression, and all that. He'd clutch those things to himself like stuffed toys now, if he could go back.

He couldn't tell if the dream was really a memory.

It didn't matter. It seemed real enough.

He was in his house, in the sunken living room. Blair was in the front hall, at the top of the three steps that led up. Thunder cracked outside, and she cringed. Laughed. She pulled her sopping raincoat over her head and shook her hair out.

When he awoke, he wanted to cry. He wanted to scream and sob and rage. But he'd left the balm of tears behind him, with his life.

*

When it came time for the water again, he was waiting. Waiting, and looking up.

Before it came, he heard the pounding of the machinery, like the sound of heavy thumping in a sealed vault. Then, above him, the circle of light appeared, like a window superimposed on the darkness.

At first, he couldn't tell what he was seeing. There were patterns of white squares. A shining silver obelisk cut into the top of his screen of vision, and there was a

billowing white curtain, white light coming through it, washing over the rest of the scene.

He studied it, trying to make sense of it.

Then the curtain billowed, and a pale form stepped through it. A woman, bright and naked as a Grecian statue.

He groaned, and wanted to cry again.

Blair!

He tried to call out to her, but his voice was like an old joint, shrunken and dry.

He realized that he was looking up into the shower in the master bathroom in his own house.

The curtain was the shower curtain. All that white was plastic, porcelain, and tile. The silver obelisk above him was the faucet.

I'm in the drain, he realized.

Blair stood there a moment, white and shivering. She was crying, staring down at the sloping side of the tub opposite the faucet.

Then she turned. Moving very slowly, she turned on the faucet.

The deluge broke over him, freezing. Then it boiled. Blinded him.

She twisted the knob to divert the water to the showerhead, and he could see her again. Water ran over her body in tiny streams, clear hot rivers running down the smooth white mountains of her flesh.

He wanted to reach up, out of the drain, and touch her. Run his fingers over her ankles, over her calves, up her legs. Even if he could only touch her toes, it would mean everything. But his body was paralyzed, worthless. A wormy deformity.

She stood there for what felt like hours, her skin turning pink under the hot water.

She faced the opposite wall and cried.

His gaze ran over her body. The bumps of her vertebrae, leading down her back like a steep staircase. Her rounded legs, her gentle hips.

She was looking at that *spot*, he knew.

When she finally turned, she'd stopped crying.

She washed her hair. Her fingers worked the shampoo into lather. She held her head under the water, rinsed it away. When the foamy, chemical-saturated water ran over him, he welcomed it. It seemed a part of her.

After a long time, she twisted the handles on the faucet. Reached through the curtain and retrieved a terrycloth towel, a splotch of bright pink in that screen of white.

She toweled herself dry and disappeared through the curtain.

The sound of her footsteps thundered in the pipes.

Her footsteps, the pounding of the wet machinery.

She shut off the bathroom light, and he settled into the darkness again.

*

Little by little, he wriggled his way toward the mouth of the drain.

She came and went, showered and dried. He never tired of watching her, of loving her, the closeness of her, the warmth radiating off her body as it steamed under the hot water. When she wasn't there, he felt very alone.

*

Once, he thought she saw him. She'd stepped into the tub, and was about to turn on the faucet when she knelt, gasped, and looked at the drain.

More than ever, he wanted to speak. To tell her it was him, that he was dead but he wasn't, somehow, and he still loved her very much.

She stood up quickly, left the shower. Reappeared with a rolled magazine and swatted the drain.

She reached down and pinched the crushed body of a silverfish between her fingers, then dropped it down the drain. It landed between his eyes. He was helpless to brush it away.

When she turned on the water, its legs became tangled in his eyelashes and it didn't wash away.

He spent a long, black time between her showers, the dead silverfish crusting on his eyelid, before she came back and it finally washed away.

*

He lost consciousness again.

When he came to, he knew she'd been there. There was water around his eyes, a rusty taste in the back of his throat.

He'd missed her.

It didn't matter. He was close to freeing himself from the drain.

He writhed in the pipe, twisting his snaky body up, little by little, toward the opening.

He realized that he could feel his arms again. That he could differentiate them from the rest of himself.

He wriggled his fingers, catching them on the lime encrusted sides of the drainpipe, propelling himself forward until he could see over the lip of the drain's mouth across the floor of the bathtub, a vast plastic landscape dotted by dirt particles and tiny hairs. Over the course of the long night, he squeezed himself out of the drain like toothpaste out of a tube.

*

Coiled like a withered rope of flesh on the floor of the bathtub, he took stock of his body. He was naked, very white, and very thin. His skin was transparent, wrinkled, emaciated, and diseased-looking.

He lay there, exhausted. Instinct told him to pant, but since he no longer needed oxygen, it didn't help.

Eventually, he lifted a claw-like hand and curled his fingers over the side of the tub.

*

His movements were fueled by will alone. It cost him everything he had to drag himself into the dank space under the toilet tank, where he rested.

His body felt painfully dry. What served as his skin was flaky and pale. His hands, little more than knobby twists of stiff fingers, hung limp and half-severed from his wrists. Death had widened the razorblade slices like thin-lipped smiles. The skin had split cleanly, like a sausage skin. Like the waxy rind of a fine cheese.

*

Supporting himself by his frail, trembling arms, he dragged his body, hand over hand, out from under the toilet, toward the shower mat. The tiles inched by underneath him, smooth as glass but hindering his progress like jagged rocks, rough as sandpaper on his half-dissolved skin.

When the shower water cut off, he let his upper half collapse to the floor and raised his arm as high as he could. Reaching. Hoping she'd see him.

She got out of the shower, dried herself, wrapped a towel around her hair.

As she turned to leave the steamy bathroom, she stepped on his fingers. The pain was blinding. It sent a swarm of black spots across his vision like evil gnats. His scream was dry and dead, howling from the twisted, empty husk of his body like a

desert wind. His eyes were dry as shriveled grapes in the canyons of their sockets. He wasn't even allowed the relief of tears.

*

Leaning heavily on the faux-marble sink, he stared into the mirror. Stared at the reflection of the Van Gogh print on the opposite wall, the painting of the wheat field. A gash of yellow beneath a dark sky, a black crow with a blue halo around it.

He stared at the reflected wallpaper, the plastic towel bar. A tiny spider scuttled up the wall.

Even the spider has a reflection, he thought.

But he didn't.

It felt like an insult.

At least I'm standing now.

He leaned in close to the mirror. Inhaled, though it took him a moment to remember how, to feel out that ability. He exhaled a fog of foul warm breath.

A circle of condensation appeared on the mirror. He felt a flare of white-hot joy. He lifted one trembling hand, a weak bouquet of needle-thin fingers, and traced his name in the fog.

He tried to smile. But his face felt like it was carved in granite, unalterable and cold.

*

He unraveled his dry, mortified body across the middle of the bathroom floor and lay there like a severed tentacle. The house settled around him. He watched the sunlight, streaming through windows in other rooms onto the hallway carpet outside the bathroom, moving in bars as the day advanced.

The bars of light glowed golden, then got fuzzy around the edges, then faded and vanished. Evening came, then night.

Eventually, he heard her moving around downstairs, talking on the telephone.

The house grew quiet.

Night passed. He felt like he was lost in a black, endless field. He wanted to sink into the only kind of sleep he was allowed, even if his dreams, his memories, were always in orbit around him, lush and alien planets.

But he couldn't.

In the morning, she came into the master bathroom to take her shower.

He'd been saving strength all night for the moment she turned on the light. When she did, he lifted a feeble arm. She didn't even glance at him, but closed the door behind her, hung her robe on the back of it, and stood at the sink, brushing her teeth.

Her heel was inches from his face. His fingers tingled, and he reached out to touch her. Half a centimeter from her skin, a bolt of agony passed through him in a current, and he jerked his hand away.

He wanted to scream. Couldn't.

He lay there silently.

She vanished behind the shower curtain, and he heard her crying over the sound of the rushing water.

Steam rolled over the cold floor, over his discarded snakeskin of a body.

She got out of the shower. Dried off. Wrapped a towel around her head and went to the door for her robe.

As she passed, she stepped on his thin, tube-like torso. There was a crunch. A scarlet wave of fresh agony crashed over him.

Pass out, he begged silently. Pass out, pass out, pass out.

But he didn't.

He twisted and writhed.

Soon he was exhausted. He looked up at her, a towering soft statue. A look of wonder, of love and fear, had buffed the pain out of her grief-lined face.

She was staring at the foggy mirror. At his name, like a photographic negative, traced in the dew of his ghostly breath just a day—*feels like weeks*—earlier. In stark relief, as though chiseled in stone, it seemed to glow in the condensation.

Blair!

She looked around the bathroom, her gaze as deliberate and searching as a periscope.

“Tom?” she whispered.

Blair!

She stood there a long time, waiting.

He reached out to touch her foot and that unbearable, vibrating agony coursed through him again. He tried to endure it, to reach through it. It may as well have been a steel barrier.

*

When he walked, it felt like nails were being driven into his heels. He leaned his full weight against the hallway wall, progressing an inch at a time. Shuffling, grunting. A hollow, exhausted horror.

The house was empty. The hours passed, each one like ten to him.

When he reached the top of the stairs leading to the first floor, he collapsed.

*

The doorbell rang. He watched from upstairs as Blair answered the door.

A pretty, dark-haired woman wearing an expensive coat opened her arms as she stepped in, and Blair hugged her. They held each other a long moment.

“Hi honey,” said the woman.

A red-headed boy, seven or eight years old, came in behind the woman.

“Thanks for coming,” said Blair.

“Oh, this’ll be fun. We’ll have fun.”

She handed a video to Blair, who read the title on the box and laughed.

The woman said, “Josh has got books, his video game, action figures. He can play in the dining room?”

“Oh, sure, of course,” said Blair. “I set up a TV in there. And the beanbag chair.”

“Sorry I couldn’t get a babysitter.”

The little boy stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking up.

“Come on, honey, Mrs. D. said you can play in the other room.”

The dark-haired woman took the boy by the hand and pulled him toward the dining room. He lingered, staring up, and then capitulated, letting the woman drag him away.

*

Much later, the sounds of the comedy the women were watching floated upstairs, buoyed by the current of their wine-soaked voices.

The boy appeared at the bottom of the stairs again. The sight of the boy terrified him. The boy stood there a long time, looking up.

Then, as though stepping on something dangerous, the boy gingerly placed his foot on the first stair. Stepped up. Placed his other foot on the second stair and stepped up, and kept coming.

When the boy was five steps from the top, he froze, staring. Then he turned and bolted back downstairs.

The video cut off, and he heard their voices. “Josh, I told you to stay in the dining room. What were you doing up there?”

“I needed to use... the bathroom.”

“What’s the matter?”

“A man’s up there.”

“Oh stop it.”

“Who’s up there?” Blair asked.

“A man,” Josh said. “A scary man is upstairs.”

“Just stop it,” his mother said. “Go back and play your video game.”

They argued some more. Eventually, the little boy passed the stairs alone. He didn’t look up. Near the front door, he broke into a run and ran all the way to the dining room.

Blair and her friend talked softly below. Blair was crying. He couldn’t understand most of what they said, but he heard a snatch:

“...think Tom might still be in the house...”

More quiet crying.

The movie came back on.

*

Why did I start in the drain? The question came to him a hundred times an hour, begging for an answer. He decided he'd probably started there because that's where the last of his life had flowed, red and thin.

It was a terrible place to start.

*

Once, he managed to knock the telephone handset off the cradle when she was sitting on the couch.

She picked it up and listened, as though waiting to hear a voice. To receive a message he desperately wanted to give her, but couldn't.

*

He wanted to attach himself to her when she went to work, when he missed her most. But the thought of it terrified him. What if they became separated? It took him hours to move across one room. Outside, he could be lost forever.

*

It seemed the only way he could have physical contact with her was if her touch brought him pain. If she stepped on him, kicked him across the floor, or walked into him and tore his skin with her toenails, then he felt her, even though she couldn't feel him. If he sat next to her when she was on the couch, staring at her, thinking her name, and she moved absently and came close to him, he'd be shocked by that deep red pain.

*

It scared him, watching her.

She wasn't moving on. Wasn't getting better. Every night, the television blared louder, the wine flowed earlier, and she cried longer.

It became too exhausting following her between rooms, watching her deteriorate. So he returned to the master bathroom permanently, to be with her where she

cried the most. He spent his time behind the toilet, or in the corner behind the door.

Once, he pulled himself up by the marble surface of the sink so he was standing in front of the mirror again. He breathed onto the glass, lifted his hand.

But he was afraid to write a word.

*

In his dream, they were in a bus together. They were very young. Eighteen and sixteen, maybe. Still in high school, where they'd met. They were traveling through bleak, snowy, open country, fields flying by in the freezing night.

He was wearing his heavy cashmere coat, the nicest item of clothing he owned. Her head rested on his shoulder, and she was asleep.

The bus bounced over a pothole. She stirred, looked up at him. Took his hand.

*

When he came to, the bathroom light was on. The door was open, too, and the hall was very dark.

It's not morning.

Blair never deviated from her routine.

He lifted his head off the tile floor and saw her. She lay in the steaming tub, slumped against the sloping side opposite the faucet, her head rolling on the white wall. She was crying, and there was a long, sharp blade in her hand.

If she cuts her wrists, she'll be like me.

The realization fired in him an all-consuming compulsion to save her. If it meant he never saw her again, even in death, he couldn't let her follow him that way.

His thin, white fingers bent back against the hard floor and snapped, sending jets of molten pain through his arms as he clawed at the smooth tile, scabbled over the floor towards her. *Can't let her do it, can't let her do it, can't let her do it.*

*

A year before he found himself in the drain, he'd started visiting a psychiatrist once a week. She was a fifty-something woman with bugged eyes and a haircut twenty years out of style. She told him to keep a journal, and to write in it regularly.

Once, he'd written that he was often kept awake at night by the thought of dying.

"Why are you afraid of dying?" the doctor asked.

"Because I don't understand it," he said. "Because nobody does. It's non-existence."

"You don't believe in an afterlife?"

"Not really."

"Are you afraid of *how* you'll die?"

"No, I already know that."

"How do you believe you will die?"

"I'm going to kill myself." He said it simply, matter-of-factly.

"You think the pressures of your life will drive you to suicide?"

"No," he said. "I think that eventually I'll feel like doing it, and I'll just do it."

"Do you have a plan for doing it?"

He didn't answer, but thought a moment.

"Do you have a plan, Tom?"

“Not a specific one. I’ve just... I don’t know. I’ve always known I’m going to kill myself. Since I was a teenager. Maybe earlier.”

“And what do you think will happen after you do?”

“Non-existence.”

“What do you think that will be like?”

He thought again.

“Restful,” he said.

*

He clung to the edge of the tub, looking into her beautiful, makeup streaked face.

With one arm, he batted at the knife she held. His other arm couldn’t support him alone, and he fell to the tile. He reached up again, for the knife. Touched her hand instead, and agonizing spasms roared through him.

He lay beside the tub in a puddle of soapy water, shivering, staring up at her, willing her to put the knife down.

She turned her hand over and stared at the white, soft underside of her wrist. She touched the blade of the knife to the skin there. Pressed down on the back of the blade, pulled it away.

A fresh crop of tears sprang up in her eyes, fell into the bathwater.

Tremors wracked his spiny, worthless rail of a body. Her calm, her *focus*, scared him. He knew that pleased look. He understood the emotion behind it. He’d looked that way himself, once.

Propping himself up on one bony elbow, he reached for her again. Strained, until his insides crackled and burned. He forced himself to sit up. He swatted at the knife, his fingers connecting with her wrist instead.

Electrical pain knocked him flat on his back. She pressed the blade against her wrist again, the hand gripping the handle shaky and white-knuckled.

Don't, Blair.

He imagined having to crawl over the side of the tub after somebody found her, after they hauled her body away and drained the pink water.

Imagined peering into the drain. Seeing her eye in there, staring up at him. Pulling out her dry, empty form. Watching her drag herself over the dirty tiles. Clawing over the floors of the empty house with him, inch by inch, hour by hour, day by day. Frail, helpless, unable to even speak.

He shoved hard against the ground, propelling himself up. He reached out again, struck the knife with the tips of his thin broken fingers, and knocked it out of her hands and into the water. It landed on the bottom of the tub with a heavy thunk.

There was that look on her face again, same as when she found his name written on the mirror, when she held the handset he'd knocked off the cradle to her ear and listened.

He was exhausted. He lay next to the tub, trembling.

She looked around the room. Her eyes were bright, wet and penetrating, peeling the visible layers off everything. Trying to see beneath what was there.

Eventually she stood, stepped out of the water and onto the bathmat. Dried off. Wrapped a towel around her hair and tied her robe around her.

*

After the house sold, Blair's dark-haired friend with the little boy packed up Blair's toiletries so she didn't have to go back into the master bathroom.

He considered following Blair. Crawling into one of the moving boxes, emerging in her new home.

But if he did that, she'd wind up in another bathtub somewhere, another knife to her wrist. Remembering the little signs she'd seen, the evidence of him around her. Things falling, words written on the mirrors. Probably thinking that a few good slashes were all that separated them.

So he let her go.

Alone in the empty house, he pulled himself over the side of the tub, and crawled back into the long-dry drain. It was the place where he'd started, the place that had birthed him into his afterlife, and he felt close to her there.

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SECOND PLACE

Ijasan Adelehin is a Nigerian writer residing in Lagos. He has been published in magazines such as *The Deepening*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Epic Literature* and *63 Channels*. He received the Foyle young poet's award in 2004 and the Highly Commended Award for BBC Northhamptonshire's Write '04 poetry competition. His recent work, *Mirines & Myaegles*, a fantasy novella, is scheduled for release by eternal press publishers sometime in June 2008.

Omoonile

by Ijasan Adelehin

Driving by Agee road you could see for yourself, the naked man, adorned only with a necklace of strung empty peakmilk cans, parading his estate, muttering to invisible cohorts, chewing on dirt and tugging at a phallus that made women blush and men green with envy.

His name was Omoonile. It was not a name his mother had given him but one he had acquired and borne unconsciously as a man unknowingly bears a wart in the center of his back where his hands can't quite reach. It was what the children who taunted him all day with stones called him. It was what the adults who drove past and spat in his face called him. It meant Owner of the Land.

The land in question was a sprawling three-acre dumping ground adjacent to the Agfa Photo Factory on Agee road. It was said that he'd roamed all of Lagos before finally settling there, cavorting about maniacally all day and sleeping in the large yellow incinerator at night. On this land, it seemed that he was utterly happy; it was his final camp, the end of a long sojourn through unimaginable realms and against insurmountable odds. Here he was sole proprietor, lord and king over rotten vegetables, empty beer cans and lots of waste paper. Here he was Omoonile.

Everyone believed him to be mad and they were right. He was as mad as dam backwards. Nakedness was his major feature and he'd been thus for almost twelve years since he escaped, according to legend, from some sanatorium; or, more likely, from the frail clutches of distraught relations. Twelve years of nakedness and as a result he was as black as soot. Even the whites of his eyes had turned a certain shade of black—a sure consequence of years spent frolicking open-eyed in mud and dirt with the ardor of a feverish pig. His hair had tangled together into long tawny dreadlocks which hung about his wizened and perpetually petrified face. And despite his descent into subhuman existence, his body was quite muscular, lean, and sculptured with a certain perfection reminiscent of Greek statues. He was a man who might have been something with the ladies had he been sane.

He was a man who had been something with the ladies when he was sane! Now all that was gone, along with the humanity which he once treasured. His former niche in the world, however small, was now closed to him forever.

The animals loved him, though. In the eyes of rodents and stray dogs, he was one of them, he was friend. When he scavenged a new heap of debris, they joined him unwarily; and if he suddenly burst into tears as was his wont, they rallied to his side to comfort him. And at night, when fear gripped him with its taloned hands, cold as steel, and shook him till his teeth rattled it was the animals that kept him company.

And, understandably, he had come to affiliate with them. The humans had shunned him out of their world with spit, stones and satire. They had over and over again asserted that he wasn't one of them. They had with their inhuman actions pushed him into places he would rather not go, unreal places the worst of which he withstood as if in the eye of a tornado whilst centrifugal fiends pulled at his hair, taunted him and poked with pitch forks.

The animals never showed hate, disgust, judgment or criticism. They never threw stones or spat into his face and above all they were the best conversationalists. He would spend hours talking with a dog or rat or cat and subsequently, his vocabulary dropped from inarticulate—but humanoid—mumblings to barks and squeals and mewls. If a stranger walked unto his land, Omoonile would dart out

from behind the incinerator, barking, his mane of dreadful locks trembling with excitement; and if he happened to step on a sharp stone he'd roll over whimpering.

Now, on a cold starless night in November, this creature of the dump heard a sound. He'd been sleeping in the big yellow incinerator with his head propped on a pillow of feces when the sound awoke him. He recognized it as the squalls of a child and it evoked in him a tense reaction. Omoonile peeped from his bed box. His compound looked exactly as he had left it, a seeming disarray of debris cresting and falling with uneven undulations. But then he noticed a new addition—a Samsung VCR carton. He jumped out of his incinerator and hurried to it. He opened it carefully and saw a pink baby wrapped up in a pink shawl.

Now, Omoonile was a madman, in the societal sense of the word at least, but he was a man nonetheless and amidst hallucinations and delusions, lack of judgment and thought reversal, anarchy of reasoning and manic-depression, he comprehended abandonment like no other. At the sight of the child he crumpled slowly into tears—he, Omoonile, probably deserved to be abandoned for he was old and must have sinned some in the past but not this baby; innocent as grass it was.

Omoonile picked the baby up and cradled it, cooing until it stopped crying; then he hurried to his kitchen which was about three steps away and comprised of a stool, and a large cauldron sitting atop firewood logs shielded from the wind by rusty roofing sheets. The baby was hungry, Omoonile surmised; he would cook some soup for it.

In the horizon, clouds were beginning to shimmer with the first tendrils of sunlight.

*

It was the women who noticed first, on their way early to work. They, in their skirt suits and high heeled shoes, milled outside the perimeter of the waste disposal site, clutching at their bags and accessories, horrified at the sight before them.

The scenery looked like something out of Hansel and Gretel, except instead of a cottage there was a dumping ground and for a witch there was a madman.

And to see him like that, naked, muscled and under the incompetent control of a presumably decayed brain, clutching at a helpless baby in one arm and stirring the boiling and steaming contents of his pot with the other, evoked a unified conclusion from the women: There was no way they were going to stand back and watch a mad man cook a child, absolutely no way!

Calls were made and men roused from their beds. Within minutes, a throng of angry men, women and children had assembled.

The whole thing was over in a heartbeat: The baby was rescued and even though the madman tried to run they surrounded him, kicking, pinching, punching, and pelting him with rocks and sticks until he was lying supine, exhausted and whimpering for help. Finally, the crowd parted for a large man to pass. He was carrying a cement bag that had hardened over, the weight of which caused him to wobble. He raised it as high as his strength would allow and then let it fall onto the upturned face of Omoonile. There was a sound, like the crushing of a beer can and then silence, tainted by the feathery noise his hands and legs made as they thrashed frantically in agony. With that, everybody ran.

*

Driving by Agee road you could see for yourself, the naked man, partly covered in debris; he has a stone for a head and if you look closely, his legs are still twitching.

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THIRD PLACE

Todd Wheeler writes stories and novels, something he's dreamed of pursuing since a child. When not writing, he stays busy programming websites and being a stay-at-home dad, which is just as satisfying as being a writer and pays about the same.

More information and fiction can be found on his website: <http://todd-wheeler.com>.

Nice Shade of Blue

by Todd Wheeler

On television there would be moving trucks. He was sure of it. The cardboard boxes would be brown and new, not scuffed up ones with "oranges" or "Kossack Vodka" printed on the sides. The family's clothes would be in suitcases, not garbage bags. On television people didn't lose their homes.

Devan stood in his room, hands in the pockets of his jeans. The hardwood floor was bare of even dust. Through the window he could see the backyard where he'd never play again. Beyond the yard, the sparse woods separated his street from the next one over.

He heard Uncle Jack cursing outside as Jack dropped boxes and furniture into the back of his pickup truck. Devan's mother Sherri was on her second trip to the new apartment. And Devan's little brother Tyler was somewhere in the house.

Tyler was two years old. Devan was thirteen. None of Devan's classmates had siblings that young. Tyler had straight black hair while Devan had blonde. Tyler was part Asian. Devan told his friends that Tyler was adopted.

Devan walked around the house and found Tyler in the kitchen playing with plastic blocks. They were moving to an apartment complex in town known as the Heights. In Devan's school the losers lived at the Heights: the poor kids, the freaks, the ones that didn't dress right, or have iPods or cell phones. Devan knew he wasn't the coolest kid in school but at least he had a cell phone. He hadn't yet told his friends he was moving.

Uncle Jack entered the kitchen through the side door. He wasn't really Devan's uncle. His mother described him as a "good friend." Uncle Jack didn't sleep over, only gave Sherri pecks on the cheek, and didn't yell at them. He wasn't Asian and he wasn't blonde so Devan was happy enough to call him Uncle and leave it at that. Jack wore new looking blue jeans and pointed cowboy boots. The tobacco tin made a circle in the pocket of his red shirt and there were juice spots on its front.

"I think that's it," Jack said, fingering his mustache. "You want your bike in the truck?"

"No. I'm riding it to the new place."

Jack nodded and leaned into the sink to spit. "Amazing how much stuff you can get into a small house. You'll be tripping over each other in that apartment."

"Yeah. And I gotta share a room with this one."

"Oh, this one's no trouble," Jack said, picking up Tyler. "Are you buddy? You doing okay, Devan? This must seem pretty confusing, having to move and all."

"Yeah, I get it. My mom's rolling over to the bank."

"Uh, well. I wouldn't put it that way. It's not her fault. Anyway. There's nothing left in the basement, is there?"

"I'll go check."

"Thanks, Devan. If I have to go up and down those stairs one more time I'm gonna have a stroke."

The basement was little more than a damp crawl space. The floor was gravel and the head clearance low. Devan peeked behind the oil furnace that sat on a small slab of concrete, wandered over to the sump pump, and took turns around the steel support posts, reaching out with his hand to touch the cool painted metal. Nothing was left. The house, the one constant in his thirteen years, was empty.

The house had belonged to Devan's grandmother. When Grandma Rose was alive they visited once a month and on every holiday. The kitchen always smelled like dessert: strawberry shortcake in the summer, pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, and cookies year round. It was his real home, not the other apartments, the motels, or the car they'd lived in for two weeks.

When he was eight years old, Grandma Rose died. He didn't know many people at the funeral. There were a few of Sherri's cousins and the next door neighbor, old Mrs. Reilly, whose house was so close that she could see into their living room. Sherri inherited the house along with the back taxes and the second mortgage. She stretched the life insurance money along but in the end, with two kids, day care for Tyler, and a small Wal-Mart income, she couldn't keep the house.

The bank was eager to foreclose. Every day the creditors and lawyers called. Sherri was overwhelmed and wanted the ordeal to just go away. She signed away the deed to the bank. An apartment at the Heights was the best she could do without moving out of town.

Devan picked up a handful of gravel. The first rock missed the pump in the dry well. He threw harder, his jaw clenched as he whipped the sharp rocks. They hit the pump and ricocheted away with a *ping!*

"Devan, your mom's here!" Jack said.

"Okay!"

Everything was done and everyone get out. The new people were coming that afternoon. Devan went up the narrow cellar stairs and then outside to the yard. His bike leaned against the back of the house. He pried up the bottom shingle at the corner of the wall and caught the spare key as it dropped down from where he had hidden it.

His mother had given the other keys to the lawyers. She'd searched the house and assumed the extra one had been lost. Devan slipped the key into his pocket and walked his bike around to the front of the house.

*

The Heights was made up of five buildings, each three stories high, forming an "E" around the parking lots. In their building, the carpet on the stairs was faded and worn down the middle. The hallways echoed with music and soap operas that bled through the walls. The building seemed like a series of jail cells, each door identical except for the number. Dozens of cars were in the parking lot, but no one was outside, no kids playing, nobody talking to their neighbors.

They took turns holding the security door open as they unloaded the truck. Tyler was occupied with some toys in the living room, boxes around him forming a playpen. Up and down the stairs they went, Devan grateful for each trip outside as he escaped from the stale, funky air in the hallways. The parts of the crib were stacked against the wall in the bedroom the brothers would share. Each trip up added a few more boxes until most of the floor was covered.

When everything was in the apartment Jack went out to get pizza and soda. Sherri rested on the couch with Tyler. Though she was only thirty, Sherri looked older than the mothers of his friends. She had more lines around her eyes and mouth. Her straight blonde hair looked like dry straw.

With their heads together Devan could see the lips of Tyler's and Sherri's mouths were the same as well as their noses. The rest of Tyler looked like the guy. Sherri told Devan she had been out with some guy and she got pregnant and that was all. The guy wasn't coming back, just like Devan's father, whoever that was.

"Mom," Devan said.

"Hmm?" She opened her eyes slightly.

"What's Jack's deal?"

"What do mean deal?" Sherri asked.

“Are you, like, dating him and stuff?” Devan blushed a little at braving the topic.

“I told you before. We’re just friends.”

“Is he rich? Someone I know at school says he’s rich, and kind of nuts. At least, his parents said Jack’s a head case.”

He had her full attention now. It seemed like a simple question to him but she took her time answering it. Tyler shifted in her arms and opened his own eyes as she stroked his head.

“Not rich, but he’s got money. He won the lottery a long time ago. Maybe he doesn’t act like your friend thinks he should, like he’s had money all his life. But he’s a good person. So don’t let this kid tell you he’s not.”

“Well if he’s rich, maybe you should date him.”

“Go set the table,” she said with an edge of anger in her voice he hadn’t expected.

“If I can find the plates,” Devan said.

*

Jack did the talking as they ate. He had worked as a car salesman, disc jockey, house sitter, and professional poker player. Lately he’d been singing for a country western band, as close as he’d get to being an actual cowboy. The stories he told usually made Sherri laugh but that night she sat mute and glassy eyed.

“Can I go out?” Devan asked when the pizza was gone.

“Out? Where?” Sherri asked.

“Just out, ride around the neighborhood.”

“Might be easier,” Jack said, “with one less body in here. Me and Devan will get the crib together so Tyler can settle down. Then Devan can have a break from us old folks complaining about our backs.”

Sherri shrugged and nodded. The pieces of the crib baffled Jack. Devan arranged the springs and bolts until he deciphered the order they went in. He tightened the nuts while Jack held up the sides of the crib. When it was done Devan said goodbye and his mother waved, distracted by the piles of stuff that filled the living room.

Outside, the dishwater sunset was draining away through gray clouds. Devan lay his bike flat in the woods where it wouldn't be seen. He walked carefully from tree to tree until he could spy around one and see his old house.

The lights were on and their voices carried through the open windows. Devan saw a guy come into the bedroom that Sherri used to have. He put a box down and went away, brought another in and went away. He looked normal enough, had short hair, was clean shaven, and wore a t-shirt. The woman's voice was light, friendly sounding, going up and down in tone. Devan was too far away to hear what they were saying. He backed away quietly, got his bike, and went home.

*

There were six weeks of classes left at the middle school. Devan took satisfaction in the number of friends he could talk to in the hallways. In the eighth grade he was the master of his universe. The following year in high school he and his friends would be at the bottom of the food chain again. After classes let out Devan was unlocking his bike when his friend Mike found him.

"Hey D-man," Mike said. "Up for some baseball?"

"Yeah, all right. Where we playing?"

"Vet's field," Mike said, unlocking his own bike. Devan coveted the expensive BMX model that Mike had tricked out with a reinforced fork, axel pegs, and triple wall rims. "Got your glove?"

"Gotta go home first."

"I'll come with you. It's on the way."

Devan had hoped to finish the school year without telling anyone about the move. He couldn't get past Monday. He leaned on the handlebars of his own bike and thought for moment.

"What's up?" Mike asked.

"Promise not to tell anyone?"

"What?"

"I moved last weekend," Devan said.

"What, like out of town?" Mike asked.

"Worse. The Heights."

"Damn. You're going to get shot."

"I know. It sucks. Don't tell anyone?"

"I won't," Mike said, wheeling his bike around. "But I don't think my mom will let me come over to your house any more."

At the baseball game Devan played well at shortstop. He made good throws to first, turned a double play, and didn't throw over anyone's head. He had been practicing at school on the weekend, throwing at a square he had drawn with chalk on the brick wall. Devan got on base twice but his team got out before he could score. Their side was last up and down one run.

Devan hit a single and took a big lead off of first base. Mike was up and hit a grounder to third. Devan pumped hard, feeling strong and mean. The second baseman was a seventh grader who Devan didn't like much. As he slid, Devan aimed high and kicked the kid in the shin to take him off of second base and miss the throw. An argument started and shoving began. Mike and the other captain managed to get everyone cooled down and broke up the game. Devan rode home, keyed up and ready to break something.

*

He went back to his old house after school. There were no cars in the driveway. Wednesday was senior's day at the center and the next door neighbor, old Mrs. Reilly, would have been picked up by the van already. It would be safe enough to go into the house.

Devan crept up the side stairs and unlocked the door. His pulse throbbed in his temples as he slipped into the kitchen. This was his kitchen but their things sat on the counter like silent, watchful strangers. The refrigerator door, stripped naked when they moved, now had different magnets and pictures on it. He recognized the man in a few. The woman had a big smile, freckles, and short curls of red hair.

Boxes were scattered in the rooms, brown boxes from U-Haul with descriptions written on the sides in neat black letters. He stood just inside the doorway of their bedroom. The bed, dressers, and side tables were a golden oak and looked new. The room smelled lived in already, a combination of musk and flowers and dirty laundry.

His room was empty. Sample color strips from the paint store were taped to the walls, green squares on one side and yellow on the other. The back wall had different strips of blue with strange names like "Ocean's Wave," "Dusky Night," and "Forget-Me-Not."

In the living room was a large entertainment center made of black painted wood. It was against the wall where the couch should have been. Opposite, the couch was between the windows where the television belonged. Devan shook his head. These people had it all backwards.

A dozen trophies sat on the shelf above the stereo. One had a plaque engraved with *MVP, Little League Championship*. The column sparkled green and white in the afternoon sunlight. A gold figure on top was delivering a pitch. Devan grabbed it by the column and slapped the heavy granite base into the palm of his other hand. It occurred to him that the trophy would break the television set very easily.

Outside a car door slammed. Devan's muscles tensed. He edged toward the side window. The driver helped Mrs. Reilly down the steps of the van. There were no

blinds or curtains on the windows of the house. She'd be able to see him. Devan reached back to replace the trophy.

Only the shelf wasn't where he thought it was. The trophy hit the edge and dropped towards the floor. Devan spun and grabbed at it. The shelf with the other trophies tipped down and spilled. It was a slow motion disaster as he grabbed and danced, not wanting anything heavy to hit his feet. The shelf came down on the stereo. The corner of the next shelf gave way and the black stereo boxes went sliding. Thunking sounds on the floor were joined with the cracking of wood and the crescendo of falling CD jewel cases. Devan sandwiched the stereo boxes between his hands and felt the whole entertainment center leaning forward. He let go of the boxes and pushed up and back, getting the heavy wooden furniture back on center. The television had slid out a few inches but seemed stable.

Devan backed out through the kitchen. On the floor he saw his muddy sneaker tracks. He grabbed some paper towels from the counter top and tried to wipe them up. Another car door slammed. He stood up and ducked back down quickly. The woman was home.

He peeked up again and saw she was going to the front steps. Devan quietly opened the kitchen door and eased out onto the porch. He just got the door closed when he heard her swearing in the living room. His whole body was shaking. He got down the steps and started running fast for the woods without looking back.

*

Another day after school Devan saw a car idling near one of the other apartment buildings. It was a black Acura with tinted windows. As Devan rode by on his bike the driver's side window slid down and the music inside the car was turned off. The man motioned Devan over.

"You want to make some money?" he asked. The wraparound shades and goatee made him look like a rock star.

"Doing what?"

“I got some medicine for a friend of mine. He was too sick to pick it up. Only I don’t want to leave my car ‘cause this isn’t a good neighborhood.”

“Like, just deliver something?” Devan asked.

“Yeah, that’s all,” the man said, looking around and in his mirrors. “This building here, apartment 318. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Devan agreed and took the heavy paper grocery bag, thinking the guy must be pretty sick to need that much medicine. At the door he got buzzed in without being asked who he was.

Holes were worn through the carpet on the staircase. The fire door on the third floor was missing the handle and was propped open with a wedge of wood. The apartment was at the end of the hallway. Devan opened the bag as quietly as he could. Inside were clear plastic bags of marijuana.

At the apartment door he prayed he didn’t get shot. Or arrested. Sweat dripped down his sides. After he knocked the door opened a crack and a man peeked out.

“Who the fuck are you? Where’s Tony?”

“Downstairs,” Devan said.

The man looked up and down the hallway. He had on a muscle shirt and jeans. There were tattoos on each arm and on his neck. He grabbed the bag from Devan and told him to wait.

The minutes stretched on. Devan felt like he would throw up. He had a hard time taking a deep breath. The cops would come running up the stairs any second, or maybe busting out of another apartment door. He would get shot. People got shot at the Heights. The door opened again and the man passed a smaller bag to Devan.

“Here. Tell Tony he’s a pussy and he oughta come up himself next time.”

He didn’t wait for Devan to answer. Back in the parking lot Devan delivered the other bag and the message. The guy smiled and nodded. In the bag was a roll of money. He peeled off a fifty dollar bill and put the rest inside his leather jacket.

“Here kid. Stay out of trouble.”

When he got to his own apartment Devan locked the doors and went to his room. He sat in a corner, back to the wall, and hugged his knees to himself. He stayed there until Sherri came home with Tyler.

*

There were two weeks of school left. Devan rode his bike straight home, avoiding friends, strangers, and especially black cars. Jack smiled as Devan came into the apartment. Jack was on the floor building towers of blocks. Tyler knocked them down and squealed with glee.

“You’re getting to be a regular here,” Devan said.

“Tyler wasn’t feeling good. The day care had to send him home. Your mom couldn’t leave work so I picked him up.”

“Debah!” Tyler said, pointing.

“That’s right,” Jack said. “That’s Devan. Your brother Devan.”

“Half-brother,” Devan said.

“Doesn’t matter. He’s still family.”

“Gee, thanks for the advice,” Devan said, slumping down on the couch.

Jack ignored the remark and built up another tower.

“No chew today?”

“Quit,” Jack said.

“You quit? I thought you were going to be Garth Brooks or something. Don’t all country singers chew tobacco?”

“It was messing up my perfect smile. And I quit the band. Well, truthfully, they kind of quit me. I was just doing it for fun. They’re going to let me DJ at that new

country station. Nights for now. I think I have the chops to do drive time. What do you think?"

Devan shrugged. Jack could sell rocks on the moon for all he cared.

"You like living here?"

"No," Devan said.

"I don't think much of this place myself. Building is worn down. People are worn down. There's fear in their eyes, at least in the people you actually see around here. Nobody dares go out, trapped in their little apartments."

"Not everyone gets to live by the lake."

Tyler stood up and toddled over to a box filled with blocks. He dumped them out, put the box on his head, and squealed again, doing a little dance.

"Your mom and I were talking," Jack said. "I've got a lot of room at my house. My sister was living there for a while but she's been gone a couple years."

"Dead?"

"Might as well be, she moved to Buffalo. Anyway, I wanted to get your opinion of this. You'd all have your own rooms there. I got a big yard to play in. It'd be a lot safer than this place."

"So what's the deal? You and my mom together?"

Jack smiled and shook his head. "Just friends."

"Are you gay?" Devan asked.

"Hardly," Jack said, laughing. "I've known your mom a lot of years. She, uh . . . she ever mention what a 'sponsor' is?"

"No."

“Doesn’t matter. I’m just offering her a chance to get ahead a little bit. She’s been kind of a wreck since losing the house.”

“She should have got her own lawyer,” Devan said.

“That wouldn’t have changed anything. I told her she could fight it and be broke, or walk away and be done with it. Either way the house was gone.”

“You told her? But that other lawyer said—”

“Lawyers will say anything,” Jack said. “See, your mother’s problem is she tends to expect the best of people and winds up getting the worst. I told her to come stay with me. Maybe seeing this place changed her mind. Or maybe she just wants to shut me up about it. But she said if it was okay with you, maybe living at my place for a while would be a good thing. What do you think?”

“I dunno,” Devan said, getting down on the floor. He moved some of the blocks toward Tyler. “You got Xbox?”

*

A week later Devan rode to the old house and stopped in the front yard. The woman’s car was in the driveway. He took a few deep breaths and went up the steps. She was at the door a second after he rang the bell.

“I used to live here,” Devan explained.

“Oh, yeah?” she said.

Her smile fell. Devan tensed, guessing she knew about the bank and the liens.

“Um. It’s a nice house. You want to come in?”

Devan shrugged then opened the screen door. Most of the boxes were unpacked and out of the way. They had painted the living room a bright yellow. He looked at the entertainment center and saw the shelves had been replaced with plywood boards. The stereo was dented and missing a knob. The trophies were gone.

“Looks a little different now.”

“We’ve been decorating,” she said. “Did you forget something here?”

“Forgot to leave this,” Devan said, holding his hand out. “Extra key.”

“Ah. Thank you,” she said. Again, her smile faded a little. She stared at the key, turning it over in her hands. “It’s a nice neighborhood. I grew up two blocks over. After college I convinced my husband this would be a good place to raise a family.”

“It’s okay,” Devan agreed. “You have a kid?”

“Going to,” she said, looking up and touching her stomach. “Where did you move to? Did you stay in town?”

“Yeah. The Heights.”

“Oh. That’s, uh . . . ”

“It sucks,” he said. “But we might move again.”

“Well that’s good. Did you have the bedroom next to the kitchen? Want to see it?”

Devan shrugged and they walked in. Test squares were painted on the walls: a few green and yellow ones and eight different shades of blue.

“We’re having trouble picking a color.”

“No kidding. You like blue, huh?”

“It’s going to be a boy,” she said, walking to the far wall. She pointed. “I like this one and that one on the bottom. My husband likes that one over there.”

“That’s too dark.”

“That’s what I said. You don’t get much sun in this room, do you?”

“No. And it’s cold as hell in the winter.”

She nodded. “Good to know. What do you think? Which color do you like?”

Devan thought about it for a moment. Most of the colors were a shade darker or lighter than each other. He looked carefully, making an effort to focus that he usually reserved for playing video games or sweating through a test he hadn't studied for. He walked to the wall and pointed to a square.

"That one?" she asked. "It's kind of a powder blue, don't you think?"

"It's brighter. Like in the living room. The room will be brighter."

"You don't think it's a little, you know, girly?"

"He's a baby, what does he care," Devan said. "When he's six he'll want race cars, then posters of basketball players."

She nodded again. "And then Led Zeppelin posters at thirteen, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

They went into the living room. He stopped by the entertainment center, looking at the stereo. Hands in his pockets, he fingered the fifty dollar bill.

"Funny thing about that," she said. "My husband messed up putting the shelves together. Must have been all his trophies weighing down the top one. The whole thing came falling down the other day."

"It didn't fall," Devan said.

"Yes, it did," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It fell. Okay?"

He looked at her and felt angry. Not like before, not wanting to break and smash. Angry at her compassion and mad at himself for what he had done to get it. He took a deep breath and held out the money.

"It didn't fall. I'm sorry."

She hesitated and then nodded, taking the folded bill.

"Where are you moving to?"

“By the lake, maybe,” he said, pulling away from her and going to the door.

“Oh really? How fancy. From the Heights to the lake in only a month. You’re quite the social climber.”

He shrugged and blushed. “It’s uh, a long story.”

“What’s your name?”

“Devan.”

“I’m Karen. If you need any boxes for your move, come on back. We’ve got more than we’ll ever need.”

“Okay,” he said, going out the door.

“And Devan. Take care of yourself, all right?”

“Okay,” he said, smiling.

He rode his bike, traveling fast on the streets of his town. He decided he would get a summer job. He would go home and talk with his mother. He knew he could convince her to stay at the Heights for now. Jack wasn’t his uncle, or his father, and he sure as hell wasn’t Devan’s sponsor, whatever that was.

They would get out of the Heights because they could, not because someone had pitied them. They would leave as a family, himself, his mother, and his brother. Moving men would arrive with a truck. Their clothes would be in suitcases. And everything else would be packed away in boxes, new brown boxes from U-Haul with descriptions written on the sides in neat black letters.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Laura Loomis is a social worker in the San Francisco area, looking for a publisher for her novel about child protective work. "The Hostage" is part of a series that she hopes will become a novel-in-short-stories. Other stories from the same series have appeared in *FLASHQUAKE*, *ALALIT*, and the web site for the St. Louis Short Story Prize.

The Hostage

by Laura Loomis

The ransom note's lying on the coffee table, a jumble of different-sized words and letters cut and pasted from the *Chicago Tribune*. I finish cutting the last word from the shredded newspaper (which Roy hasn't read yet), paste it in, and admire my handiwork.

"Dear Roy: I have kidnaped your dayplanner. If you want it back, you must comply with all my demands. Meet me with the ransom (strawberries & whipped cream) promptly at 8 p.m. tonight in the living room. Synchronize your watch. Do not wear anything except the watch. Do not contact police. Do not try to run your life (and mine) by a damn appointment book. As you can see from the attached photo, your dayplanner has not been harmed. Follow my instructions exactly. Love, Jesse."

I'm tempted to spell out, "Your boyfriend, not your kid, your employee or your crazy sister who acts like you're her father," but that would probably be overkill, and anyway I'm out of room.

I add a Polaroid of Roy's dayplanner, tied up with a rubber band and looking (I hope) sufficiently frightened.

I picture Roy's reaction: wondering if he has another appointment tonight at eight, and wanting to check his dayplanner. He'll just have to tough it out. I turn off my cell phone and head downtown. If I go home, Roy will show up there, so I go out to breakfast with my best friend Gabe. When his cell phone rings, Gabe checks the number and whistles softly. "Roy must really want to find you if he's calling me."

"Don't answer it."

"Not on your life."

I drop by the Deaf Club in the afternoon. My parents aren't there, but some family friends are, so I stick around for a poker game. Playing cards against deaf people is tricky: they're used to catching every nuance, even if you have a great poker face, which I don't. I think I'm pretty observant, and I usually clean up against other hearing people, but with this crowd I'm out fifty dollars before quitting.

I get home promptly at eight (on time for once), dressed in black like a proper kidnapper with my curls stuffed into a stocking cap. The dayplanner is tucked under my arm, still tied up. I'm sure I had a great opening line, but when I open the door, Roy is still dressed. All I can think to say is, "You didn't follow my instructions."

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused?" Roy's towering over me, with a twitch at the corner of his mouth that I've never seen before. "I've been calling you all day. I missed a really important meeting because of your stupid prank!"

"Jesus, Roy, I was just trying to inject a little fun here!" Or maybe that's not what I was trying to do. Maybe I was trying to provoke this exact fight. I toss the book onto the table. "You run your whole life by plans and schedules—can't you just let go of control for one goddamn second? Or are you afraid you might enjoy it if you did?"

"I'm kidding, idiot," Roy says, and pops a strawberry into my mouth.

*

“And so ends my career as a kidnapper, with your dayplanner back safe and sound.” My criminal outfit is scattered on the living room floor. I got Roy to come to bed without even putting the leftover strawberries away.

Roy pulls me tight against him. “I can’t believe you didn’t see the strawberries. They were sitting right there.”

“Well, it was kind of distracting having you yell at me like that.” He knows I hate yelling. Growing up in a house full of deaf people, if it couldn’t be said with an eyebrow, it didn’t need to be said.

“Sorry.” He kisses my forehead. “What was I supposed to synchronize my watch with, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Big Ben? A sun dial?” I give Roy a strawberry-flavored kiss. “How come you don’t have a computerized one?”

“What?”

“A computerized appointment book. Or do they not have all your alphabets?” Depending on who Roy’s meeting with, his notes might be in Chinese or Russian.

“Just a creature of habit, I guess.”

“Someday I’m going to free you from that evil book, *gelibte*.”

“It’s *gelibter*. *Gelibte* is the feminine form,” he corrects, tapping me on the nose. This is what I get for living with a goyish linguist. “And that evil book keeps us in this nice house.”

“Oh yeah, that thing about making a living.” I nip at his finger. “Speaking of.”

“Uh-oh.”

“My airline just called. I have to leave first thing in the morning on a six-day run.”

“Where to?”

“Maui.” I’m trying not to grin, but come on, it’s Maui. “I’m not packing anything but my swim trunks.”

“Sounds nice.” Roy pulls away from me and stretches out on his back. “So I’ll see you Friday night?”

“Saturday. I’ll be back early Friday, but I have plans with Gabe that night. We’ll be out late, so I’ll probably just stay at my place. My old place,” I amend hastily, before Roy can remind me that I live here now. “Gabe’s place.”

Roy adjusts the covers.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I wait.

“You’re gone for six days, and you can’t come home the first night because you have plans with Gabe.”

Why the hell does Roy bother being jealous of a straight guy? Gabe and I have been friends since forever, we were roommates for years, of course we’re going to hang out together. I don’t complain when Roy sees his friends.

“If it was a seven-day run, you wouldn’t care, so what’s the difference?”

“It just seems like it’s always Gabe this and Gabe that. You couldn’t be here for Christmas, but you can always be there for Gabe.”

At this point, we could put the fight on a tape recorder, push Play, and go do something else. It’s the same every time. “Hello, planes fly 365 days a year? Every Jewish flight attendant works Christmas. What does that have to do with Gabe?”

“You’re always off somewhere with him. Sometimes I feel like he’s here in bed with us.”

I make a show of looking under the covers. “I don’t see anyone here but you and me. And that big guy under there.” I slide a hand down to where it would be more useful.

Roy grabs my hand. “Not now. I’m tired.”

I turn my back and settle in to sleep.

*

I wake early the next morning, and pretend not to watch as Roy dresses. Roy keeps his suits in a specific order in the closet, and can find the one he wants without the light. When his tie is straight and his shoes are on, Roy unexpectedly lies back down next to me, curling an arm across my chest. “Don’t leave angry,” he whispers.

“I’m not,” I answer, but I don’t turn. “I just wish you’d give me a little breathing room sometimes.”

Roy pulls his arm away, kisses my shoulder, and leaves for work.

I can’t get back to sleep, so I finally pull on my uniform and go downstairs in search of breakfast. Roy has already tidied up and left last night’s clothes folded in a pile. My mouth’s stuffed full of bagel when the phone rings. I sign a swear word at it. What part of “breathing room” does Roy not understand?

“Roy, you there?” comes a bright female voice.

I grab the phone, chew twice and swallow. “Hi Angel. Your brother already took off. I was actually about to call you. I can’t go with you to hear your musician friend tonight—my airline’s sending me to Maui.”

“Rough life. I may skip the show anyway. Got to pack.”

“Don’t tell me you’re moving in with that guy,” though I already know the answer. Angel changes boyfriends more often than hairstyles.

“Trust me, you’ll like this one. He’s a great cook and a great dancer. Let me give you the new phone number before I forget.”

I scribble it down. I’d been looking forward to going out with her tonight. If Roy and I don’t make it, I can’t expect Angel to stay friends with me. I try to keep her on the phone. “I’ll be gone until Saturday, so if you need to get bailed out of jail this week, you’re out of luck.”

“Will you shut up about that? If Roy ever finds out, he’ll—”

“—pack you off to a convent or something.”

“I told you, that was all a misunderstanding anyway.”

I wipe bagel crumbs off the counter, something I rarely bothered to do while rooming with Gabe and his many girlfriends. “And you’re not with that guy anymore, and the new one’s squeaky clean. You told me. So how did you meet —”

“Hang on. My friends are here to help me get this mess packed. I’ll catch you next week.”

“Love you, Angel.”

Before I have the kitchen phone back in its cradle, my cell phone blares. The *1812 Overture* could only mean one caller.

“You’re up early, Gabe.”

“It is boring as shit over here ever since you went all domestic on me and moved out.”

“I’m not always domestic. Sometimes I get international flights.”

“Ha ha. So hubby didn’t kick you out over that little stunt with his appointment book?”

That seems like ages ago. “Actually, that was fun.”

“Don’t worry, princess. I’ll save you from that guy yet.”

*

It's easier to think about Roy with some distance between us, like about 35,000 feet of airspace. Sometimes it feels like the final fight is bearing down like a jet headed for the tarmac. If only Roy wouldn't pick such inopportune moments to try to work things out.

There are things I adore about Roy, like the way he makes me feel like the most important person in the world. I've never had that with anyone else. The first thing he did after we met was learn to sign so that he could talk to my family. He's a good guy, no matter what Gabe thinks. But Roy belongs with someone who doesn't mind being held hostage by a dayplanner and having his Yiddish corrected in bed. I belong with, I don't know, a gay version of Gabe, or something.

The blond boy in 7C gives me a knowing look. He's cute, and he's giving my gaydar a definite buzz. I could make a clean break right now. If I cheated with him, I'd have to tell Roy, and there would be no going back.

After we land, I'm the last one off the plane, only to find the guy waiting at the gate. "This is my first time in Hawaii," he says. "Maybe you know some good places to go?"

I can think of several places I'd like to go, and none of them would require leaving my hotel room. "I'm sorry," I tell him. "I really need to leave."

I catch up with the rest of the flight crew, all heading for the hotel van. Socializing with the crew is *de rigeur* on a layover. We spend the next few hours going to dinner, tossing back umbrella drinks, and splashing in the ocean. Even after the others return to the hotel, I walk down the beach in the dark, avoiding Roy's inevitable call.

When it's three a.m. in Roy's time zone, I go back to my hotel room. The message light is blinking, of course. I'm tempted to ignore it, but I have to check just in case it's the airline. I can always tell Roy I was out too late to call back.

The only message is from my dispatcher. "Change of plans. You're on the 8 a.m. flight to Hong Kong, with a 4-day layover."

“It’s winter in Hong Kong!” I sputter, gesturing angrily to the empty room. I didn’t quite carry out my threat to pack only swim trunks, but there’s nothing in my suitcase warmer than a Hawaiian shirt.

And Roy never called.

*

“So what does it mean?” I’m on the phone with Gabe, again. There’s nothing else to do in Hong Kong, where it’s too cold to venture out of the hotel room. “Usually he’ll at least call to ask why I left the coffee pot in the laundry room or whatever.”

“Well, either he’s trying to turn into Prince Charming and change his evil controlling ways, or he doesn’t love you any more. Christ, how do I know what it means? Maybe he’s screwing his secretary.”

“He doesn’t have one.” His last one quit after ten days. “Look, will you be serious? I don’t know whether I should call him or not. I mean, I left a message about the Hong Kong thing, but that was it. Maybe he thinks I did this on purpose.”

“Jesse, can I just state the obvious? Do you really want to go through life making me analyze every goddamn call he doesn’t make? Nobody else drives you over the edge like this.”

“Nobody else is this important.”

“Maybe nobody should be. Except me, of course. Look, you don’t need my permission—or his, either. Just dump his ass, if you can get the stick out of it first.”

*

When I get home, I have a built-in excuse not to call Roy, since I already said I was going clubbing with Gabe. Roy came with us once, said he didn’t care for the noise and smoke, and has let us out alone ever since.

We’re still on the first drink when guy with a shaved head asks Gabe to dance. “As long as it’s okay with my boyfriend,” Gabe says, and gives me a wink as he heads

for the dance floor. Some straight guys would be freaked out just by being here, let alone being cruised by horny boys with faulty gaydar. Gabe's attitude is, what kind of damned fool doesn't want to be told he's sexy? He'll string them along as far as he can, taking their drinks and their flattery before he brushes them off and heads for a straight bar. By then his ego will be nicely pumped up for the women who make him do the work of pursuit.

I'm starting to relax, looking at hot bodies in muscle shirts and tight jeans. I get pulled onto the dance floor by a bleached blond guy with a heavy Spanish accent. When we stop for a drink, he writes his number on a napkin and stuffs it in my jeans pocket.

I say thanks but no, and go find Gabe. "Let's just go. I'm done."

On the way home, I think about calling Roy, but I don't. At home we have another drink, and another. My face feels like I'm still on the beach in Maui.

"So, nobody worth grabbing tonight?" Gabe asks. "That Puerto Rican guy was seriously into you."

"I'm taken."

"It's all right, I won't be jealous." Gabe leans in close, his breath reeking of scotch. To me it smells like iodine.

"Yeah right." I push Gabe away.

"Why don't you just do it and get it over with?" Gabe asks.

"Do what?" I answer, though I know he means breaking up with Roy. Gabe is a good friend, trying to do right by me, but I'm softening toward Roy. I'm looking forward to seeing him tomorrow and telling him about the ridiculous trip to Hong Kong. Roy's arms would feel pretty good right now. Maybe he wouldn't mind a slightly drunken late-night call. I open my mouth to explain all this to Gabe.

The kiss lands without warning.

Gabe bends down, and in the space of tongue meeting lip, I have us married and growing old together, Gabe will move into my room and we'll turn his into a den, and we'll never fight over who left the kitchen a mess or who went out clubbing last night because we'd go together, and I'll learn to love kisses that taste like iodine, and my parents will be thrilled to have my best friend for a son-in-law, and then Gabe's tongue escapes and he slips away.

"Damn," he says, "drunker than I thought."

Gabe saunters to his room and shuts the door behind him without looking back. I stay in the living room for a while, perched on the arm of the couch, hoping he'll come back for me. Finally I retreat to my old room and strip for bed, leaving the door open. I wake up alone.

*

In the morning, I go home to Roy without calling first. Roy greets me with an enthusiastic kiss. "How was Hong Kong?"

"I have no idea. It was too damn cold to leave the hotel room."

Roy rubs my arms as if I still needed warming up. "I missed you."

This is going to lead to sex soon if I'm not careful. And you can't just come in, have sex, and then break up with somebody. I pull away and sit down on the couch. A moment later, I realize I should have chosen the easy chair. The couch has room for two. "Gabe and I had a great time out clubbing last night."

"I know. You have that out-past-your-bedtime look." The trace of accusation in his voice is slight, but I think that's just Roy's phenomenal self-control.

"We'll probably go out again later this week."

"Try to pencil me in this weekend." He smiles belatedly, to let me know he's joking, but he's not really. I see the tightening around his eyes. Roy's poker face is worse than mine.

I want Roy to do the work for me, to make the break or at least make it easy. It's not going to happen. I have one more attack. "There's something else. While we were out last night, I sort of, ah, kissed someone else." Should I say it was Gabe? I'm not sure Gabe would want that mentioned. I don't know what Gabe wants.

The phone rings. A momentary flinch is the only sign that Roy hears it. He examines my face as if proofreading a document.

"You kiss guys all the time. Was it something more than kissing?"

The answering machine picks up in the kitchen. *Hello, you've reached Roy and Jesse....*

"No," I answer with a vehemence that surprises me. "I didn't cheat on you."

A woman's voice is leaving a message on the machine, not quite intelligible from here.

"Then why even mention it?"

My nerve is failing me. I don't want to be the guilty one. "Nothing. Never mind." Roy's gaze is still focused on me with searing intensity. "It was nothing. Forget I said anything."

Roy exhales slowly, then gets up and walks to the kitchen. I hear the message played back, and a moment later, Roy swearing.

I stay in the safety of the living room. "What?"

"That sister of mine. She left a message to call her at her new place, but did she leave the number? And her cell's not working."

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you. Angel called right before I left for Maui. I wrote the number down somewhere around here."

"Did you put it in my dayplanner?"

Shit. "I forgot. It's there on the counter somewhere."

“I don’t see it anywhere on the counter.”

My jetlag is hitting, I was on my feet for sixteen hours yesterday, and the last thing I want to do is get up and look where Roy already searched. Still, I get up and squeeze past Roy to sift through the pile of mail on the counter, all organized according to Roy’s filing system. “I’m sure it was here.”

“Well, it’s not here now!”

“I can fucking see that!” I feel like I should still be moving papers around, even though we’ve looked through everything. “She’ll call back.”

“You know how Angel is—she may not call again for a month.”

“Then whatever she wanted can’t have been that important.”

“I just want to know how to reach my sister if I need to. Goddamnit, you’re always doing this!”

“Angel’s a grown woman. She knows how to dial a phone.”

“Then why can’t you act like a grown man and keep track of one stupid phone number? Why didn’t you just put it in the book?”

“I don’t know, there was another call and I got distracted.”

“Yeah, who?”

“What difference does that make?” That answer, of course, is the same as admitting it was Gabe.

“Why don’t you just say it? Gabe called and nothing else mattered.”

My face is burning and I don’t want to look at Roy. My mouth tastes like iodine.

“Roy, would you just—”

“Why do you have to be like this?” he yells.

He won't even let me finish a damn sentence. I switch to sign language so he can't interrupt. *Again with Gabe! I lost a phone number. It'll probably show up tomorrow in the fridge or something. Why do you have to make everything about Gabe?*

"You make everything about Gabe." Roy's volume is still rising. "He's always here, or you're always off somewhere with him. He doesn't like sharing you with me."

Maybe it's me that doesn't like sharing me. I hate the way you act like I've done something wrong every time I see Gabe. I don't want to be with you every minute.

Do you want to be with me at all? Roy's signing now, which means I can't look away. I feel transparent as Roy demands, Why do you come in here and tell me about kissing some other man, and then say it's nothing?

I don't know! I sign with a vehemence that might as well have been shouting.

Bullshit. You've been edging toward the door since the day you moved in. Just give me a straight answer!

I give him the one sign everybody understands.

*

When I get home—I'm already thinking of it as home again—all I want to do is talk to Gabe. We'll hammer it out about Roy, and tomorrow while Roy's at work, Gabe will help me pack and move out.

Maybe Gabe will be too embarrassed to talk about the kiss last night. Somehow I'll find the guts to bring it up, and show the backbone I didn't have with Roy.

A woman's laughter floats out of Gabe's room, a high-pitched nasal sound. It's not even noon yet, and somehow Gabe's managed to get a woman over here. The laughter is followed by rhythmic moaning. Gabe's not normally this loud.

I dump my travel bag on the bed that used to be mine. My uniform shirt hits the bed, and a slip of paper pokes out of the pocket. Sure enough: Angel's phone number. I shred it and throw the pieces into the toilet. Then I crack a beer, go back to my room and slam the door.

Untied from Roy, I want to spread out in every direction. I could go out now. Call that Spanish guy and see what he wants to do. Or hop a plane back to Maui; I can get free flights anywhere my airline goes. I could march over to Gabe's room and tell his girlfriend to leave.

I curl up on my bed, taking up the smallest possible amount of space.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Catherine Solange lives with her son and his father in the mountains of central California. She is completing a novel.

This story represents her first published fiction.

The Only Sober Gringo

by Catherine Solange

Early this morning I dragged my nauseated self out of bed, put on my dangly silver earrings from Taxco, drank too many cups of coffee, thanked the hotel manager for his informative pamphlets on birds and got back on the highway. Caffeine's coursing through my veins. My gun's in the glove box. My claw-shaped garden digger's on the passenger seat. On the Richter scale of hangover magnitudes, this one's a 7.5. I've known worse.

I've been driving west from Mexico Highway 1 toward Puntas Canoas for an hour and thirty-five minutes and have not seen a single vehicle. My guide book for the "seasoned, well-equipped, adventurer in heavy-duty, high-clearance, four wheel drive vehicles" is the only one to include this unnumbered side route to the Pacific, recommending its unmatched solitude. I did pass a herd of wild burros a while back, but by the time I stopped and found the camera, they were gone. Wild animals in any unmanaged habitat thrill me. Especially non-predators.

I'm beginning to wonder if my self-appointed real estate partner and new friend (maybe boyfriend but it's too soon to tell) has actually driven out here to this undeveloped region below San Quintin. Ernesto suggested I check it out as a place where we might still be able to afford a few hillsides with ocean views. He says new

communities are just starting to spring up along the coast and we should put together a group of investors to build one. It's easier to picture him reveling in the nightlife of Mexico City than in the emptiness of these desert plains, immense open spaces between mauve hills and dark blue mountains that rise to eight thousand feet.

Ernesto lent me the handgun. It's funny; my distaste for the warrior persona created problems with my live-in boyfriend back in L.A. When Josh strutted and puffed about his service as a Navy SEAL, I felt compelled to mock or insult him. Now I have no alternative but to rely on my warrior within. She did manage to save the day when I got separated from my hiking group and lost my bearings near the silver mines in the colonial city of Taxco; she's no stranger. It's even possible we're on good terms.

I coax the old SUV up a steep sand hill. A few miles back a dry stream bed appeared alongside this nightmare I've been calling the road. The arroyo looks smoother and wider and, if it doesn't take a sharp turn somewhere, it must end up at the ocean. Unless today's my day to perish in a flash flood, perhaps I could steer the vehicle over this next big hump then turn right. My life would be immediately easier.

I stop, get out and walk to the rear door. Somewhere in the back of this vehicle is the owner's manual. The thought of having to find it, then having to study the section about the four-wheel drive option makes me want to collapse on the sand. The instructions will be written in five languages, all questionable, and I'll stare uncomprehending at a series of indecipherable diagrams with arrows to misspelled words, then die alone in the desert of thirst and fatigue. Because I can't face the manual, I'll just stretch out on the warm ground for a short nap.

I deeply resent the professional appraisal I'm receiving from a buzzard flying overhead. Having decided I'm still alive, the bird soars off, disappointed. "Check back later!"

My best alternative is to walk the rest of the way to the beach. I stand, back up a few paces, try for a running start toward the steep hill of sand but end up climbing on all fours.

Before me lies the Pacific. I am overjoyed and whoop as heartily as I can, given this particularly inconvenient hangover. The ocean is less than a mile away. I tumble back down the sand dune, jump into the driver's seat, shove the gear stick into what I pray is four-wheel drive, attack the mound of sand—and yes! over I go. I plunge down the last bumpy hills.

Puntas Canoas has no market. There are no houses either—only a few shacks on the beach, a busted pier and several small wooden fishing boats. The beach is long and glorious and the waves are breaking just right. I see campsites with umbrella-like tents constructed of palm fronds further down the shore. Goats are tied to a truck. Kids collect shells. A man digs for clams. There are a few swimmers in the water. This is the end of the world.

I need a rest and a swim. A cold soda. I have juice boxes in my snack supply, but I must get my hands on an icy cold bottle. If I were back at the hotel bar, I'd be ordering my second Bloody Maria with lots of celery.

Two and a half hours of Baja desert has called up an acute, unaccustomed craving for conversation. Even a quick *Buenos Dias* will do, so I run along the surf toward the campers. I can't help but notice I'm the only blue-eyed blonde on the beach, but it certainly won't prevent me from being sociable.

A couple seated under a *palapa* waves me over. The woman offers me a *torta*, which I gratefully accept. It's a thick roll stuffed with pork, salty white cheese and a dressing made with cilantro. The whole thing has been flattened and toasted. Their youngest daughter is filling the rolls and an older son is grilling them over a fire in a pit. I sit on the sand to eat with them. Unfortunately, they don't appear to have any frozen colas.

“*Que rico! Delicioso!*” I am not merely being polite. It's a marvel of a sandwich. I exaggerate my friendliest smile and, to make sure I don't scrutinize, I keep my eyes on the food. Perhaps I should have waited until everyone was served before taking a bite. Do they say prayers before eating? I'm the only one with food in my mouth. I don't want to be rude, but I am famished.

“*Tengo mucho hambre,*” I apologize. I successfully avoid the word-for-word translation of “I am hungry”—an error typical of beginners—using the correct verb, *tener*. I have much hunger.

“*Me llamo Camille.*” (I call myself Camille.)

They call themselves Jorge and Juanita. Their family name is Garcia.

It’s rare that my fluency in Spanish surpasses others’ in English. I gradually lose my self-consciousness. Free to make mistakes, of course I make fewer. Forming sentences with words from a new language and actually being understood, I feel competent and happy. I let myself imitate their cadence. Sounding more and more authentic, I compliment la senora on her outstanding, bright green mayonnaise.

The man tells me there are no actual towns nearby, only an abandoned port for shipping onyx, where he worked years ago. He gestures toward the dark blue mountains. Up there is a rancho with cattle, pigs and goats, where he works now. It’s part of the *ejido*, therefore, communally owned. As are the beach, the fishing pier and the boats. Proudly, he points down the shore to the commune’s system for distilling ocean water into drinking water. I see what appear to be gasoline drums rigged up to make a still.

They have no gas station, market or post office. Ernesto is mistaken. There are no new houses being built and no Americans living here. The idea of new houses for gringos amuses the couple so much they laugh out loud, as if to say, that could never happen here.

I hope they’re right.

An American lived here last year, Jorge says. Here on the beach. He and his wife met the man personally. According to the gringo’s license plates, he’d come from Arizona. That used to be his truck. Now a shell, it’s been harvested for every last part, including the Arizona plates. The American had silver hair, although he was not old. He arrived dressed in a suit.

It’s called a tuxedo, says his wife.

A tuxedo, Jorge concedes. The man must have been important in government or commerce to be wearing such clothes. The locals hadn't been able to agree on the best explanation for his attire, but they shared the opinion that he was running away from something very bad. *Muy malo*.

"Tuxedos are usually for weddings," I offer. "Maybe he left his bride at the altar on their wedding day. Or, she left him. That's the most likely. That she didn't show up at the ceremony. Or, she came to the church, then couldn't say her vows and she ran away at the last minute."

I can tell from the looks of utter bafflement on their faces that my suggestion is incomprehensible. If I'd told them the lady was offered millions of dollars and life everlasting but turned the deal down, it would be easier for them to accept. They can't imagine any man or woman falling into doubt about marriage and family. For them, it's the sacred path to human fulfillment. They could be right. But I doubt it.

When the man from Arizona arrived in Puntas Canoas, the bed of his truck held twenty-five cases of scotch, they tell me. Nothing more. He gave away his tuxedo, sat on his beach recliner in his underwear and drank. Sometimes a fisherman would sit with him, but the gringo never confided his troubles. Or his name. Locals called him *El Rojo*.

Alluding, I suppose, to his sunburn. I touch my face. "*Tenia la cara quemada?*" He had the face burned?

"*La nariz roja.*" Jorge points to his nose.

Ah, the red nose. The advanced alcoholic's snout. A few nights ago, I thought I noticed tiny broken blood vessels spreading upward from my right nostril.

For a while, Red dug clams to feed himself and in the afternoons he swam to cool off. Later, through his long decline, the people of Puntas Canoas brought him food and drinking water. The day they discovered him dead in his chair, two bottles of scotch remained in the back of the truck under twenty-five empty boxes.

“Maybe a diagnosis of terminal disease sent him running, not romantic rejection,” I wonder aloud. “Maybe he’d just been hit with financial disgrace and public humiliation.” But neither explanation would require a tuxedo.

Jorge and Juanita shake their heads and shrug. *El Rojo* is the unsolved mystery of Puntas Canoas. Now he lies buried in his boxer shorts in the scrubby bushes behind the shell of his former truck. They lead me to a cross housed in a brightly painted wooden memorial box decorated with seashells, plastic flowers and two full bottles of Johnny Walker Blue Label.

I feel I should add something to the legend. “Did you know that this beverage costs two hundred and sixty-nine dollars a bottle?”

They turn to each other in horrified disbelief. “*Doscientos dolares!*”

“I swear to you, it’s true.”

I must take a closer look. I haven’t enjoyed hearing their narrative. It stole the verve from my inner warrior. Their man from Arizona is an ugly hint of what might happen to me. I’d feel more confident if I could remember the last time I went a whole day without a Margarita. Could it get so bad that I’d drink myself to a lonesome death someday on a beach at the remote edge of civilization? End of tale.

Naturally, I want to break open one of the two sealed bottles, take a swig and compose a moving toast to failure. The bottle has that nice hum, that bouncy sensation in my hand. Two hundred dollar scotch. But Juanita stands next to me looking down at the memorial box, making the sign of the cross. It would be a defilement. I put the bottle back where it belongs.

I leave you the crust of my sandwich at the base of your grave as an offering, *El Rojo*. I’m sorry your journey to Puntas Canoas didn’t have a happy ending. I’m sorry I’ll never know your whole story. I’m sorry I drove all the way out here for this nasty peep at my worst case scenario.

Juanita and Jorge return to their spot under the palapa and sit close together. He puts his arm around her as she puts hers around him.

I hope you don't mind if I lean my tired, slightly throbbing head against your wooden box, *El Rojo*. What happened to your warrior self? He got used up, exhausted from doing battle year after year. That's the worst tragedy of all in your sad, sad story. You managed to make it all the way out here to the end of the world in your big old truck. Then, you gave up. Warrior, defeated. I write this, your epitaph, in the sand. I cry for you. Even though you bought yourself the best booze money could buy. I've never tasted two hundred dollar scotch, but maybe I can live without it.

Listen, Red. Scotch isn't a big favorite. Tequila isn't something I generally drink straight from the bottle, no matter how expensive. I'd need a blender, lemons and limes, kosher salt and a steady supply of ice to kill myself. A super-sized cooler for the ice. Without an electric plug for the blender, I'd probably have to buy a special attachment for the dashboard. It might be more convenient just to sober up and stay that way. Drinking myself to an early exit has held its secret appeal. I admit this only to you. I know death promises rescue, but why didn't you give the waves and the sand and the sky and the people a chance? Puntas Canoas is turning me into a stranger, even to myself. A welcome stranger.

I rejoin Jorge and Juanita and the three of us sit in silence, watching their kids play in the waves. The couple wears the same mended, faded clothing the children wear. Their faces are dark and lined. They may be the children's grandparents, rather than parents, but, with my new no-stare policy, I can't tell for certain.

One of the girls, whose clothes are dripping wet from swimming in her blouse and long pants, hands me a glass of Sidral apple soda, and I say, "*Muchas gracias.*" It's warm, of course. I drink it anyway.

Ernesto generally knows what he's talking about, but he'll be lucky if his imagined community forms here in the twenty-second century. Or the twenty-third. Perhaps our great-great-grandchildren will ride horses and swim and surf here with descendants of the Garcias.

It pleases me to be the only outsider here on the day this family has traveled down from the rancho to picnic on their communally owned pristine, empty beach. No typhoid here. The children probably won't attend school, but they're laughing,

healthy-looking and well-fed. They're enjoying their lives at the end of the world. I'll stay here with them. For awhile.

They're clamoring for me to swim. Not wanting to run back to the SUV for my swimsuit, I jump right in—with eight-year-old Anna—in my skirt and blouse and we play catch with a chunk of sea lettuce. Three of the older kids join me on a raft anchored well beyond the breakers and we use it as a diving platform. One by one, I teach them to arch their bodies and keep their feet together as they spring off the raft. With practice, the children can dive in formation at one second intervals.

The sun is hot. The water is clear. I lose myself in the best body surfing waves I've caught since I was eight.

*

Hours have gone by since I arrived at Puntas Canoas. I keep telling myself to get up and leave, but I can't. Sea creatures must stay, must allow the elements to heal them. I'm prone on the white sand while the heat of the sun smooths the muscles of my back and shoulders. Salt water dries on my skin and makes my hair crunchy. I smell like the sea. It reclaims me, restores me, cell by cell, mineral by mineral. This is my extravagant spa treatment. I turn over. To tan my perfect nose.

I'll beg Ernesto never to recommend this place to his band of partying gringos. They must not find Puntas Canoas. Whether or not I can commit to it as a place to live forever, I want it to look exactly the same whenever I return. This beach must stay the way it is. Without the whining of jet skis the Garcia family could never afford. Without ugly black smears left on the sand by three-wheelers they'll never ride. It will not be like beaches to the north, where, instead of diving and playing, children hawk cheap bracelets and chewing gum nobody wants to buy. Nothing like Rosarito or Enseñada, loud year-round with drunk tourists. A respectful, appreciative guest, I'll be the only gringo allowed. Locals will remember who I am and they'll always welcome me. "She comes sober and leaves sober." That's what they'll say.

I am unprepared to set up camp and, of course, there is no lodging. Perhaps this was mentioned in the guidebook. I'm glad there's no hotel, but it means I must get

back to Highway 1 before nightfall. If there's one thing every Baja guidebook agrees upon it's the extreme stupidity of driving on Highway 1 after dark. Everyone you talk to advises against it: never get caught in the high beams of a big rig driver on crank speeding down a two-lane road with no shoulders.

Jorge and Juanita and their grandchildren send me off with oranges and homemade caramel candies cut in squares, like fudge. Eleven-year-old Herman walks with me to the SUV, unselfconsciously holding my hand.

"Would you take these to your family?" From my snack supply, I hand him a jar of peanut butter and one of raspberry jam. When he turns to wave, I run after him with a bag of gummy worms and a pack of juice boxes.

I face a long, agonizing ride—hours of jolting and bashing—but if I think about it, I'll get discouraged. The caramel candies are orgasmic. They alone were worth the grueling drive to Puntas Canoas, where I am thankful to have spent a day.

Opening the vehicle door, I notice the garden claw I was ready to use as a self-defense weapon and remember the handgun in my glove compartment. I laugh at the power and significance I bestowed on such outlandish objects from an alien, violent world. How extraneous they seem now. I take my emergency bottle of Tres Presidentes out of its thermal cooler bag and pour it into the sand.

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HONORABLE MENTION

Travis has been writing since birth. The plains of Nebraska were perfect for filling his head with hobbits, vampires, Cimmerians, Tharks, and Jedi, twisting him into his occasionally warped persona. After being an engineer, a bookseller, a farmer, a construction worker, a comic shop clerk, and a game designer, he taught English in Fukuoka, Japan for three years. These days he writes full-time. He now makes his home in a much larger world than before.

Fragile

by Travis Heermann

My day begins with crap. It would be a fit metaphor for the last three days, but I mean it literally. I'm lying in bed, flagellating myself about Kimmie, my mind jumping back and forth between that and the weird incident with the remote control.

Twenty minutes before the alarm is set to go off, a truck starts beeping, backing up in the alley outside my bedroom window. The beeping lasts for at least fifteen minutes, because drivers in Japan are incompetent. The stiff breeze from the incoming typhoon whistles through the open window, ruffling my sheets. Electric motors run and clank. Then it hits me. The most horrendous stench I have ever experienced, like a shovelful of raw sewage in the face. The truck outside is a sewage truck, sucking a houseful of shit through a big blue corrugated hose from a subterranean septic tank.

I reel out of bed, gagging. Someone is puking in another apartment. I hear Candice, a couple of apartments away, yelling in English, "Oh, my god!" Even in disgust, her voice is warm and rich.

I slam the window closed and bury my face in my sheets, but it's too late. There is no untainted air even in there. I can only wait until the shit-suckers outside finish their job and the wind carries the stench away. But before that happens, I think my lips turn blue.

When I regain consciousness, I sit up and hold my head in my hands. Up half the night with a broken heart and now this.

I stumble around my apartment in a daze. I should put some clothes on. I shouldn't water the plants on my balcony when I'm naked. Neighbors might talk. As if the blond foreigner doesn't already give them enough to talk about. "Oh, look, kids! *Gaijin-san* is naked today." I have to get ready for work.

I look around for the remote control to turn on the TV, then I see, lying on the *tatami*, that strange little pile of crumbled plastic, metal, and fiberglass that was once my remote control. Right where I left it after it crumbled into fine gravel for no reason.

I press the power button on the TV directly. The morning newscaster appears and states the obvious. A typhoon is coming, a big one.

I haven't eaten anything since the party a day and a half ago. The interior of my torso is a vast sour emptiness. The organs must still be functioning, but they all feel pressed to the margins by the endless sizzling ache centered on my heart.

I somehow manage not to slash my jugular while I'm shaving. I put on some bland, colorless clothes, like everyone else in the board of education office wears. Halfway to work, I realize that I should eat some breakfast. I pull out my wallet and rifle through it, but I spent all my cash on things for the party.

From its place in my wallet, the four-leaf clover slides into view, the one Kimmie picked for me in the spring and laminated. Back when I was starting to believe I could have a woman who wasn't a bitter, mean-spirited emotional cripple. Coming to Japan was my first chance at a new life after the divorce. Kimiko was my first chance in a long, long time with a wonderful woman.

The day she found the four-leaf clover, one of our students put some white flowers in her hat as we sat together on the grass watching them play, and she looked at me with her smile that made my heart ka-lump in my chest. “*Kawaii?* Pretty?” And I looked into her eyes and said, “*Totemo. Very.*” And she blushed, and smiled, and looked away. It felt like something from a movie.

You dumbass.

I push the four-leaf clover out of sight, put my wallet away, and go to work.

I come home late in the afternoon. The sky is gray, and the persistent wind is driving its veil of fine, warm droplets. Everyone at the office was having the same inane conversation about the typhoon coming tomorrow. Its presence looms like impending doom, a gigantic swirling octopus sliding northwest across the Pacific.

The ache behind my ribcage throbs. In the refrigerator, there is the six-pack of Corona that she brought to the party. The ache sizzles. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to drink those beers or if they’ll just sit in there, every day for infinity.

So what do I do now? Wait for the storm and hunker down in my apartment like all the neighbors? Pine away? Kick my own ass some more?

All those shared smiles, shared cups of green tea, shared successes, shared missteps. She was a new teacher like me. All my dreams that someday we could be more than working partners, more than friends. All ashes now. And why? I’m the same man today that she worked with all those months. Why? Because now I’ve released into words how I feel about her. It has become real. One simple, but profound, thing. And didn’t she know all along?

I set my iPod to run a repeating parade of hurtin’ songs to resonate this pain and work it to the surface like an embedded splinter. I have to get it out of me. American country music is as alien here as a six-foot-three blond guy, but it does what it does best. Recollections of school-boy love and foolishness, when desire could be so focused that it burned holes in your heart, and every moment that your mind went still even for a moment, her face was right there. That was a different girl, a lifetime ago, but you remember.

You dumbass.

Every time I allow my mind to go still, she is there, like the reflection in a Zen pond. Keep the pond churning, so you can't see her.

I sit on the bed and keep my eyes turned outside toward the darkening sky. The warm wet wind blows through the screen onto my arms and my face. But my awareness turns relentlessly inward, incessantly rehashing, wishing I would have done it all differently.

The way she brushed her face against my shoulder when I joked around with her, a furtive, purposeful touch, testing the feelings, as she laughed into her hand.

Those sparkling brown eyes, brimming with intelligence and caution.

My intellect wonders how long I can feel this way before some instinct for self-preservation kicks in and forces me to think or do other things.

*

A Corona is in my hand, and the sky is dark. Maybe I'll just sit here and get drunk alone like every other poor broken-hearted sod. Then I hear feet scrunching on gravel. Standing in one of the squares of light spilling from the apartment building onto the gravel driveway is Candice. A previous problem crush of mine that, thankfully, my friend Sean solved by dating her. She waves at me from two floors down. She has one of those smiles that gleams like the sun, giving warmth to a room or blinding you to everything else around.

"What's up?" she says. "You were pretty quiet at work today."

"Just sitting here waiting for the storm." I'm not going to ask her over. "Want to come over for a beer later?"

"Nah, I can't tonight. Japanese class." Candice Chien calls herself a Hong Kong Kiwi. She grew up speaking New Zealand English and Cantonese, but neither of those languages has much in common with Japanese. She's as *gaijin* as the rest of us, but with a cooler accent.

I nod. "Next time."

"Hey, how'd it go with your girl?" she says.

The ache sizzles again. The beer bottle shatters in my hand.

Profanity erupts out of me. Foaming beer and strange, smooth pellets of glass spill between my legs, across my bed.

"What happened?" Candice calls out.

"Spilled my beer is all." I sit in the cold puddle of wet glassy sand and foam, so stunned I can't move, only think about how best to extricate myself.

"I'm gonna get moving," she says, "Don't wanna be late for class."

I wave her away as the darkness swallows her. Sean is one of the luckiest guys I know, and I'm almost always happy for him.

My blankets are soaked with beer. My shorts feel like a saggy wet diaper. For the next few minutes, I'm so worried about cleaning up the mess that I don't think about how the bottle shattered in my hand. And the remote control.

*

My *keitai* is ringing the tune of "Vader's Imperial March" from under a stack of papers on the table.

When I answer, Sean's voice comes over the phone. "Hey, buddy, whatcha up to tonight?"

"Cleaning, I guess."

"Candy's off to class tonight so she's not coming over. Wanna come over for a beer and a movie? I got *Army of Darkness* in the VCR, beer in the fridge, and chicken on the grill."

"Sure, what time?"

“Any time.”

“OK, just gotta clean up a bit first.” I hang up the phone, roll my blanket into a ball and carry it out to the balcony. I shake the glimmering granules out into the wind and bushes below.

I stop and look at the Coronas I left out on the counter.

In my head, my Ex’s voice intrudes, seven thousand miles away now, dripping with acid and vehemence. “You stupid, shallow sonofabitch. All you want is the lovey-dovey tickle-belly shit! You’ll never have a woman like that! Are you fucking her?”

I shake away the voice. Being alone is better than having to listen to that ever again. That thought makes some of the ache go away. I’ll go cry in my beer over at Sean’s, and he’ll tell me I need to go get laid.

*

Sean says, “Buddy, you just need to get your cock rubbed.”

His apartment is redolent with the smoky aroma of the charcoal grill and sizzling chicken breasts. We’re standing on the balcony, overlooking the narrow, overgrown parking lot of our apartment building. The bushes below almost reach his second-floor balcony. The stiff wind from the coming storm stokes the coals to bright orange heat and thankfully keeps the standard overabundance of mosquitoes under cover. I tip back the Asahi Super Dry and let it flow down my throat as I lean over his balcony railing.

Sean continues, “Go to a club. I would recommend Happy Cock. Dance. Pick up a girl. Get your mind off things. You got too much pent-up emotion after everything you been through.” He’s half an inch taller than me, with a wild shock of red hair, broad shoulders, still built like a University of Alberta linebacker. He’s even more freakish in this country than I am.

He is talking about my divorce; he watched me go through the final, bitter stages. And he is right about everything, but it doesn’t matter. Intellectually, I know the

best cure for a broken heart is a new girl. But the new girl I wanted is gone now. I give a half-hearted snort, “Yeah, maybe I’ll even find one that speaks English.”

“Speak the ‘language of love,’ buddy. The right attitude, the right moves, and you can be making out on the dance floor without saying a word.”

“Not in the right frame of mind for that.”

“So has she called you?”

“Nope. I’ve sent four text messages and called her twice.”

“Not good, eh?” His Albertan accent comes and goes. “So you gonna tell me what happened?”

*

What happened was, we stood on the balcony together in the warm late-summer night. A couple of tiny black bats dipped and wheeled, their squeaks barely audible, chasing mosquitoes in the breeze. She held a glass of red wine in her fair, smooth hand. Inside my apartment, the party thrummed with music and conversation. Kimmie sidled up next to me. The heat of her arm brushed against mine. My head buzzed with beer and shochu, and sublime warmth whispered through my veins from the point of contact.

“Thanks for inviting me,” she said. “You have a lot of friends.”

Yes, and all of them just “friends,” especially the women. Candice was in there with Sean. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me, too. I’m always happy when I see your name on the schedule at my school.”

Silence fell between us, and my heart was hammering. My ears burned. “Kimmie, I...” I met her gaze for a moment, then looked away. God, my mouth was dry. “I had a great time the other night.”

She smiled. “Me too.”

Jesus, what was I trying to say? I've loved you for months? Every day at your school was a joy because you were there? I'm so happy that my divorce is over so I can be with you?

I snatched her hand and began to stroke her soft, porcelain skin.

She tensed.

I squeezed harder. She was going to pull away.

"I don't know what to say. I'm so nervous," I said.

"Do you want to say something?" Her accent was almost perfect. I sighed, closed my eyes for a moment, and let it go. A jumbled deluge of English and Japanese. Everything I felt for her, all at once.

When my drunken confession petered out, she firmly extricated her hand from mine. Her back was stiff, and she would no longer meet my gaze. "You're a very nice man," she said. "But I don't feel that way about you. I'm not ready for a boyfriend."

*

"I don't remember much of what she said after that," I tell Sean.

"You told her all that before you ever kissed her?"

I nod. He looks away and scratches his head, glancing askance at me. "Ah, man. Let me tell you something, buddy..." And he goes off into a litany of advice, most of which I already know I've broken. Play it cool. Don't try too hard. I scared her off. End of story.

"Getting a girl like that is like fishing," he continues. "You got to use the right kind of bait. You had that one hooked—I could tell the other night—but you jerked on the line way too hard, and now she's gone."

The beer bottle bursts. Beer and glass fall into the bushes.

“Whoa, go easy, slugger!” he laughs. “What the hell did you just do?”

“The bottle broke somehow.”

“That must be some grip you got! You been working out, eh?” He laughs again and tosses me another bottle. “Quit wasting beer!”

I open the next one, gingerly, and when I’m not taking a drink, I set it down. A small voice niggles at the back of my mind, “*Helloooo! The remote! The bottles!*” But I can’t think about it now. My gaze lingers on the bottle. I don’t touch it for a while.

He’s telling me how he caught Candice. I watched it happen when she first washed ashore last year into our little tide pool of *gaijin*. He’s the kind of guy who knows how to work the ladies. He’s masterful, and it mystifies me. Where do you learn how to do that? To his credit, he loves Candice, and they’re happy. It took a woman like her to become his first serious girlfriend.

I’m silent for while, carefully sipping my new beer while Sean finishes up with the chicken.

Then he says, “Do you love her?”

My mind instantly returns to the face in the Zen pond. The water has stilled, and her smile heats my insides back to sizzling. I force a shrug, and a lid goes over the sizzle.

“How do you feel?” he says.

“Like I’m falling apart.”

We spend the rest of the evening watching *Army of Darkness*. The Japanese title is *Captain Supermarket*, but all the great lines are still there. I’ve always loved this flick, but it helps my mood only a little. The only other thing that shatters is my plate as I hold it in my lap when Bruce Campbell says, ‘Gimme some sugar, baby!’ and kisses the girl. In an instant, Kimmie is in my head, and the next instant the plate crumbles in my hands like brittle clay.

Sean stares at me, his gaze flicking from my face to the ruins in my lap. Strange combinations of emotions drift across his features. I sit there, perplexed, until I recover and jump to clean up the mess. He tries to make light of it, but his gaze never leaves me. How can I tell him this is the fourth time something like this has happened? I excuse myself as soon as the movie is over.

On my way down the stairs, I meet Candice coming up to Sean's. I can't count the number of times I've heard them having sex. They're both vocal. Our apartment walls are thick concrete, but the window glass is thin.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey." I pass her and continue into the night.

My head is buzzing again. The stiff breeze caresses my bare skin, and it feels good. I walk across the street to the four-hundred-year-old Shinto shrine, wishing I could find the inner tranquility that Japanese religion is so famous for. I sit down on the stone railing surrounding the massive, ancient camphor tree that is the heart of the shrine. Everywhere around is modern Japanese society, but here in the shrine yard is like a movie set in the 16th century. The lone fluorescent bulb on the caretaker's shed flickers against the dark wisps of blowing leaves.

I sit on the stone rail, feeling its cool coarseness under my palms, trying to breathe tranquility into my lungs, into my life, when something soft and warm brushes my leg. The wind almost drowns the cat's "meow"—or "nyaa" since it is a Japanese cat—but it rubs against my leg with a lonely zeal. I smile and reach down, stroking its gray ears. Its exuberant purring vibrates through my fingers, and a stab of unsought, unbridled emotion rips through me. My eyes tear up, and my throat clenches.

And the cat dissolves into a pile of coarse gray sand.

Oh. My. God.

I reach down and run my fingers through the cat. It feels like beach sand. Jesus Christ. I just killed a cat. It looked so surprised. The shock of it drives the hurting away. I sit there for a long time, my clothes starting to soak through from the fine

rain. Remote control, plate, and beer bottles. So I can disintegrate inanimate objects somehow. But now, living things, too. Holy Christ, what happens if I touch Sean, or my boss? Or the whole goddamn apartment building comes down?

For the first time in days, my mind snaps into clarity. Every single time, the disintegration happened at a spike of emotion. Is that the key? If so, is controlling my emotions the answer? I think about all the years with my future-ex-wife where I kept my emotions clamped in a vise, until the day I just had e-fucking-nough. So I have a practiced hand at controlling my emotions. Maybe I could get through this without killing anybody. Maybe the pain would eventually go away and take this strange power with it.

“Sorry, kitty,” I say, then I go back into the building.

*

Later, I lay in bed trying to read a novel. Calmly. The drone of the wind rises as the night stretches. I turn on the TV, and I’m rewarded with a weather report. My Japanese is good enough to catch about half of what they’re saying. The eye of the *taifuu* will make landfall about nine tomorrow morning and pass almost directly overhead. That means it will be a long night, as the worst of the wind and rain pass through before the eye arrives.

The leaves in the trees sound like distant applause, and the wind moans through the cracks in the windows, the cracks in the doors, even through the mail slot. Clear coagulating droplets spatter the window. There is an ‘X’ duct-taped across the three-foot glass pane to reinforce the glass against the force of the wind. A dog somewhere in the dark howls like a lost soul.

*

It’s one a.m. and my *keitai* is ringing. Who’s calling me now? The caller ID says, “CANDICE.”

“Hello?”

“Hey, I didn’t wake you, did I? I saw your light was on.” Her voice sounds shaky.

“Nope. What’s up?”

“Are you busy? Can you come over for a minute?”

“Sure.”

After throwing some clothes on, brushing my hair, swishing a little mouthwash, and a quick dry-shave, I’m out the door—calmly, serenely—wondering what she wants at this time of night. The warm rain mists areas of bare flesh as I walk across the parking lot to her side of the building. The air smells like the sea, and I think I detect a hint of sea salt on my lips. The gravel crunches with moisture under my flip-flops.

Candice opens the door on the first knock, and I slip off my flip-flops and step into her small apartment. It’s structurally identical to mine. Concrete walls, *tatami* floors, sliding *shoji* doors to partition the space. Otherwise the difference is stark. Drawings and paintings, her originals mixed with famous prints, splash her walls with bright colors. I’ve been here several times, but there’s always something different. She likes Monet. Photos with bikinis and grinning faces, warm hugs and good times. The floor and kitchen are in disarray, and the sink is full of dirty dishes, but somehow the place feels cleaner than mine, warmer. I imagine for a moment that if all the lights were turned out, Candice’s inner luminosity would keep the shadows at bay. I can smell her, too, warm and fresh and sweet. Her short black hair is pulled into a stubby ponytail. A sketchbook lies on the *tatami* in the middle of the living room floor. A half-finished pastel of Sean’s portrait. I’m no art critic, but I can see she has talent.

She’s wearing pink flowery pajama bottoms and a white tank top, exposing a couple inches of taut midriff. A red thong peeks out over the low-slung pajama elastic. I try not to look at her breasts as they stretch the thin tank top beyond legal limits. Breasts like that are unusual for an Asian woman. “What’s up?” I say.

She crosses her arms across her chest, smushing her breasts together but covering the prominent nipples. “The wind blew my window off the track. Can you help me put it back in? I can’t do it.”

“Can’t Sean help you?”

Her voice is clipped, and I hear that shakiness again. “He’s in bed.” She points me to the window beside her bed, the same window as in my bedroom, except hers is masked by tasteful blue drapes fluttering in the breeze. One look tells me that the sliding window is indeed off its track, but it should be easy to put back in place. A little wiggling, a little lifting. I reach for it, then stop. It’s glass.

I stare at it for a while. Calmly. Controlled.

Candice prompts me gently to action. “Can you get it?”

“Yeah.” I take a deep breath and begin to jimmy the windowpane back into place. I take all possible care. If it shatters, the storm will have unfettered access to her bedroom. And there is no way to fix a broken window at this time of night. A typhoon blowing through an open window all night long would all but ruin everything in the apartment.

She hovers behind me, inching closer.

I notice I’m holding my breath as I try to put the windowpane’s sliders back on their little rail. Just breathe.

Suddenly, it’s in place. And still whole. A massive sigh slips out of me, and relief washes like warm water through my hands and face.

She claps her hands with glee, jumps up to me and hugs me from the side, rubbing up against my body. “Oh, thank you thank you thank you!”

I can’t help but feel her generous breasts and her pubic bone rubbing against me through the gauzy cotton. How would one of those breasts feel in my hand? My ears buzz with a strange, muffled heat, like I’m wearing ear muffs and trying to listen to a conversation. I accept the hug, and a stab of emotion shoots through me. I begin to bleed inside.

Fortunately she pulls away and says, “You know, I was watching you and her at the party.”

“Oh?” I turn away and busy myself with checking the window. The wind is still rattling it like a baby’s toy. “Gonna be hard for you to sleep with this noise.” I look

around and find some paper to fold up and put in the cracks, to tighten the fit temporarily.

Candice is still talking. “It was pretty obvious that she was the apple of your eye. She was digging you too.”

I’m folding paper and stuffing it in the cracks, trying not to listen.

“She’s beautiful and really sweet. So what happened?” I can feel her eyes on me. Her tone is conversational, but I can hear the concern.

“Candice, I really can’t talk about this with you.”

“Why not? You’re one of my best friends. Just ‘cause I’m not a guy? Can’t do the locker room talk with a chick? I’m sure you already told Sean what happened.”

How many times when I was young, younger than Candice, before I had met my future Ex-wife From Hell, had I heard the F-word used on me? Every time like a bludgeon. *You’re such a good Friend*. How many times? How many more times must I endure it?

I sigh and look out the window into the stiffening blackness. “Let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

She waits a few moments before she speaks again. “Ah, I’m sorry. That explains a lot.”

“About what?”

“You were so excited before. The shopping and everything. I hadn’t seen you that happy probably since we first met. Now I know why you wanted my fashion advice.” She chuckles with her warm, full-throated laugh. Then her voice grows soft, almost a whisper. “Then, at the end of the night, she was gone, and you looked like someone had just kicked you in the stomach.”

The silence holds me like a fist. If I speak, I will break. She comes and stands beside me, putting her hand on my arm. “You, my friend, are a wonderful man.

Someday, there'll be a woman who will see it. And she won't flinch away from all that love you got in there." She pokes my arm gently.

My whole body begins to vibrate, buzzing like a swarm of hornets, steadily, inexorably strengthening until I feel like I've stuck a fork in wall outlet. Can't she feel the buzzing under her hand? Could that cat? Clamp down the vise. Now.

Desperate to change the subject. "So, you and Sean—"

She cuts me off. "Sean was being a dick tonight so I left." She crosses her arms.

"It's none of my business."

"Don't worry," she said. "We're fine. I'll be happy to see him tomorrow. He had better know how lucky he is to have me!" She laughs.

I turn to face her and gaze down squarely into her warm brown eyes. Long-hidden words spill out. "Sean is one of the luckiest guys I know."

She holds my gaze, unflinching, blinks once, twice, then her mouth drops open, covered by her hand. "Oh, my *God!*" Then she looks away, casting around the room, as if trying to find answers in the cracks and crannies to impossible situations. "Oh, my God, that's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me!" After several moments, the silence hangs heavy between us.

She looks at me again. I keep my hands firmly in my pockets and edge away from her.

She says with a big grin. "I love you, too." She touches my face.

I stare at her and my mouth hangs half-open. I back away, and the sizzling sound in my ears drowns out everything else.

Oh.

No.

Candice's hand falls off. I see it detach from her wrist and tumble to the floor, where it shatters into a spray of coarse particles against the reed floor, like tiny beads of human-colored glass. She stares at the stump of her forearm, watching the web of tiny cracks spreading up her arm, particles beginning to fall away in dreadful slow motion, pattering to the floor in an accelerating dissolution. There is no fear in her eyes, only fascination, amazement. Her legs crumble and give way, and her torso, her head, even her hair, disintegrate before my eyes.

The sizzling ache in my torso becomes a searing heat, and I think I make a noise. It only hurts for a moment, the heat, as if my body has flashed through a blast furnace and become molten glass. Then it all begins to crumble away from me. My fingers, my arms. I can feel my feet becoming glassy gravel inside my shoes, my legs collapsing under the weight of my crumbling torso, until I crumple into a pile of coarse, still matter.

Just a few inches from the pile that was once Candice. Just a few inches away.

Strangely, I'm still aware, my consciousness clinging to this little pile. Sometime during the night, the typhoon winds blow out not only the bedroom window again, but the balcony doors as well, and the wind lofts our scattering particles out into the rain.

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